At the End of Days

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"You know humans don't live in this world anymore, Nee-chan. They only survive."

In what should have been a final battle, something went awry. Two warriors now drift through a dangerous world, battling a bleak reality to keep their grasp on a tenuous purpose. Their story of life after catastrophe, and rebellion against fate's design, unfolds here at the end of days.

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For You, at the End of Days

Chapter 1: For You, at the End of Days

Amid the endless struggle, Ryuuko has picked up the questionable habit of throwing herself in front of Satsuki - or rather, any attacks that come too close to her.

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One \ For You - - At the End of Days

-"*You know humans don't live in this world anymore, Nee-chan. They only survive."*-

Sharp blue eyes widened in the moment Satsuki's back bumped against stone, and flecks of hot crimson sailed past the hand she had upraised in some instinct of defense, landing on her face and the wall behind her. Fine spears of living thread, electrically red and ghoulish black, were streaming with blood as they whizzed past her. Her mouth was opening as the score of diverted attacks pierced and sharply cracked the wall in several places.

-"*But if humans still hold on to the will to survive, even in this shitty world… we might as well do the amount we're able to help, right?"*-

One moment - one moment of frozen breath was all the time she had to see the rigid body tensing up before her, the spilt life bursting profusely from arms crossed in defense, from a shin, from stomach and chest and exiting her back - and the short blue hair, whisked

backwards by a shockwave, dancing and jumping along with a single lock of red. A scream.

"*Ryuuko-!* "

BOOM!

And Satsuki flinched out of her younger sister's path as the smaller girl's body, amid beginning to twist from the various angles of the Life Fibers' strikes, was abruptly blasted backwards and into the wall.

Damn it! The long-haired woman thought, rising to leap from the path of a new shower of attacks. With the crucial moments she'd been given she grasped the Bakuzan Gako dagger from where it lay half-wedged into the ground. Lashing the recovered weapon around in an acute sweep, she cut down another incoming throng of fibers. Satsuki spun on heel, teeth clenched fiercely as she narrowly evaded another quick attack, and slashed through a third.

The Life Fiber system of this nest - it was vicious, intent on overwhelming her, and seemed almost to scoff at her impudence in resisting death; but its opponent was one Kiryuuin Satsuki, a human who would not so easily succumb. Nonetheless, the fibers would not allow her to retrieve her other weapon. She scowled as they loomed up before her, an amorphous web of spindly threads contemplating their next method of attack.

"Come!" she barked in challenge, furious, as a heaping, massive tangle of the living fibers broke from the earth, shuddered, and poured itself into a dozen fibrous spears that arced and twisted toward her in a concerted advance. She set her stance and prepared to strike, resolute.

With her battle cry, the Bakuzan Gako flashed out in a lethal obsidian arc… falling short of the fibers as they snapped taut, caught fast just beyond her range. She blinked.

"Th-the core!" a familiar voice yowled.

Lying amid the rubble of the wall, one eye squinted shut, Ryuuko had grasped the Life Fibers that were now learning their mistake in having skewered her; they squirmed to escape, and with the girl's snarl her fingertips broke and stretched into bright crimson claws, drawing the color from her hands and lighting up in them protruding veins that shone an angry red. The sclera of her eye was being dyed a similar hue, as her makeshift claws sank firmly into the knotting fibers, holding them back from their shuddering attempts to stretch and approach Satsuki. Gritted teeth parted.

"The core's exposed! Take it down, sis!"

"Right!" Satsuki said, dashing aside and diving to retrieve the Bakuzan Kouryu. She rolled nimbly into a crouch, arms crossed and blades extended. She drew a steady inhalation, calloused hands tensing on the weapons' familiar, asymmetrical weights in her hands.

Ryuuko was forcing her ki into the restrained Life Fibers; the very energy they had sought to harvest raced along them and jolted into a heaped mass that writhed and shuddered, petrified, on the ground. One pulsing spot shone bright in the midst of the formless glob, and Satsuki's eyes glinted coldly.

There! she thought, lunging to cross-slash decisively through the core of the Life Fiber cluster that had infested the warehouse.

"Begone," she said flatly where she had come to a halt, dual swords extended, and cast a contemptuous glare over her shoulder. The core split and shattered, casting about the light of the lives it had stolen. *Parasitic vermin.*

The mass at last gave a roar, a dying screech of outrage, and slumped into a flattening pool. Fibers everywhere lost form as they withered to dull black and shriveled, lifeless.

"Ryuuko," Satsuki murmured, sheathing her blades while hurrying to the younger girl's side, her tattered robe fluttering about her shins as she did so. Her companion had fallen flat as well - sprawled

strengthless, partially pinned down by pieces of the demolished wall. The girl's cargo pants, cropped shirt, and cloak were becoming stained with fresh blood. "Ryuuko, can you hear me?!"

"Of course," the girl muttered. "I'm not going anywhere…" Color returned to her hands, bulging veins slowly relaxing as the claws receded. She offered a weak smile as the long-haired woman leaned into her line of sight. "We kicked its ass, right? But it was almost starting to put up an actual fight there…"

"Idiot," Satsuki scolded, working quickly to sever the clusters of threads protruding from Ryuuko's back; removed from their energy source, the strands quivered and died. They had fused partially with her flesh where they'd pierced; clenching a fistful at her front, as close to Ryuuko's body as she could, Satsuki braced the girl, pressed a knee to her elbow, and yanked firmly to dislodge them. Ryuuko went rigid, crying out madly; her foot flailed out, inadvertently hurling across the room a sizeable hunk of debris that had pinned it down. Well, that was one more problem taken care of…

Satsuki tossed the bloody mess of threads aside. With much cursing on Ryuuko's part, the rest of the fibrous strands were removed.

"Th-thanks… !" she whimpered at last, a forearm pressed across her eyes as she scowled and shook in shock.

It was only natural that Satsuki loathed to see her reduced to this state, miserable and wounded but trying to hide her pain. She could hardly scold her right now. "Focus. Are there any more of them concealed in the vicinity, Ryuuko?"

"I'm not detecting anything. It was a single-core system… j-just a tough one - agh! C-careful!" she complained as Satsuki hoisted her up, in one efficient move propping the smaller girl's belly steady against her shoulder and rising surely to her feet. Her teeth ground momentarily. The sooner she could get a better look at her sister's wounds, the better she would feel about this encounter.

"The enemy *wasn't* terribly strong this time, Ryuuko. There was no reason for this to happen…"

"What's your deal?" she said, sensing Satsuki's agitation. "We couldn't let those folks get hurt, after we barged in here and stirred up the cluster nesting in their hiding place, could we?"

"Tch…" *At least her mouth is functioning.* Satsuki's head turned toward one corner of the warehouse. Voices were heard, a sound that always seemed to fill the two warriors with a strange mixture of ease and apprehension as of late, when for weeks on end the only two voices they might hear could very well be their own. As if on cue, a solid metal door splayed with sagging, spidery black threads rattled once, twice, and burst open with a scattering of dead fibers; the door slammed around into the adjacent wall as two men came stumbling out from behind it.

This family was lucky, Satsuki mused, watching a few more survivors step cautiously into the open. *If we had come any later, the system may have already gained enough power to choose a second core. That door would never have held it at bay…* She looked down, nudging a decayed body with her foot, and gauged the time that had elapsed since its demise. *At such a time, they would have joined these poor fools…* The corpse was webbed and pierced with now-dead fibers, stitched up thoroughly and long since leeched dry.

"Wh-who are you?"

Satsuki sighed quietly, taking up a stern look as she faced the refugees they'd managed to save. "It matters not. We're humans, and because of us, this place is now safe. My partner needs medical attention. Are you in possession of any apt supplies?"

The older of the two men flinched, wary. "We might, but… what exactly is up with that one?"

Satsuki elevated a formidable eyebrow. Ryuuko did not seem altogether conscious at this point; her limp body over her shoulder

shivered intermittently. A puddle of blood was quickly collecting on the ground, dripping steadily from Satsuki's sister.

And reddened veins throbbed and faded distinctly on her quivering hands.

"I-if that girl were human, she'd be dead, right? What is she?"

"What do you suppose she is-?"

"Something else!"

"She's my *sister*," Satsuki said evenly, glowering imperiously even as the sister in question croaked out a groan of pain. Hearing this, Satsuki cringed. "And she's severely wounded herself saving your filthy hides!"

The man shook his head, eyes wide. "You should leave. P-please, just go-!" Yelping, he scrambled to stand in front of his fellows as Satsuki's short blade came unsheathed. Her aura intensified with violent brilliance; her eyes were ice.

Ryuuko would have said that there were too few humans left for them to be fighting each other, but she was naive. However ironically, it was the older sister who held no such qualms.

[img: http://orig05.deviantart.net/5b57/f/2016/010/7/f/carryfinst_by_hinata0321-d9new72.png]

"You assume a human is no threat to you, correct? But I am far stronger than the Life Fibers that trapped you here. It is by my own choice that I offered my request peacefully. But if you refuse to see reason, I am unopposed to choosing to seize what we require, and cutting down more *vermin* if it should so choose to stand in my path-!"

"… tsuki…"

Satsuki paused at the feeble mutter, though her eyes remained dangerously on the scraps of humanity cowering before her pressure. Would she have cut them down? Hardly. Though she was in quite a mind to walk into their shelter and take what was of use, knocking out any to dare try to stop her - and she doubted any truly had the gall to do that much. But Ryuuko was speaking, hoarse.

"*Satsuki*… l-let's go back." Her tone was one of complaint; she'd drawn out her sister's name, in a way that somehow struck, however ineffectually, at the fortitude of her great resolve. "I'll be fine."

The young woman contemplated, coolly and rationally.

"*Sis?* "

Satsuki's lip twitched to the smallest degree.

The dagger clacked sharply into its sheath, and she spun on heel, striding haughtily away from the potential confrontation. "Ryuuko," she said flatly, "we're going back now. I'll try my best not to jostle you. First, I need you to miniaturize the Rending Scissors to hasten our trip." She was calculating an efficient route, what areas to avoid with her reduced speed if Ryuuko was too weak to run. With no interruptions, with Ryuuko's dead weight pressing down across her shoulders, just over four and a half hours to the latest hovel they'd claimed as 'home.' Satsuki stopped before the enormous pair of scissors on the ground, disarmed earlier in the scuffle. "Ryuuko, can you do this for me? Ryuuko? Oi."

…

Satsuki's eyebrow twitched.

Out cold, then.

She scooped the scissors under her arm, recalculating as she did.

On the night we destroyed Kiryuuin Ragyou, something went wrong.

Satsuki silently drew the Bakuzan Gako before she crept into the shack. She scanned the room, mostly satisfied to see nothing disturbed or amiss. Walking in, panting under her breath, she came eye-to-closed-eye with a dark blue school uniform hanging unspectacularly on the wall. Ryuuko had held onto it for sentimental reasons, despite that it had not once awakened, not so much as stirred, since that day.

What really happened, then? It took so much… so much sacrificed, just to damage the Primordial Life Fiber the way we did. But it refused to be eradicated.

"Wake up," Satsuki muttered, though the vocalization was largely extraneous as it were beside the clap of cold water against Ryuuko's face. She jolted upright, half-alert as she yanked herself out of the oppressive depths of unconsciousness, and hissed a curse in immediate regret.

"S-Satsuki?" she croaked in confusion, letting the hands on her shoulders guide her back down. She pressed a hand groggily to her forehead. "W-water…"

"Check the area," Satsuki said in reminder. Remorse could wait for later.

Ryuuko closed her eyes, as if listening for something only she could hear. "It's clear," she confirmed. "We're safe."

A sigh of relief. Satsuki helped her sit up, and tipped a water jug carefully at Ryuuko's pursed lips. She drank so heartily she almost choked.

So we damaged the beast, and it retaliated. All the world's Revocs clothing went berserk, decimating the human population in franticness to restore its master's might. It is weakened; we've

delayed the Starseed Cocoon Sphere's genesis, if not overturned it. But at what cost?

Satsuki ran a wet rag across ruptured skin on Ryuuko's shoulder; she felt the girl tense, more so when she swabbed the gash with disinfectant. She warned her before she began suturing it shut. Satsuki had the focus to keep a steady hand as necessary, even through the sounds Ryuuko fought with mixed success to withhold as she shook beneath her.

Ragyou my be gone, but that thing, wherever it is, has outstripped its need for a caretaker. Now, Covers have been reduced to wild, almost aimless Life Fibers that presumably take less energy to manage. This is the nature of the parasites prowling the earth, spreading and nesting, actively feeding on human vitality and harvesting energy for the sake of restoring the Primordial Life Fiber.

A gauze pad, affixed to a hole in Ryuuko's shin and taped into place. The girl was almost fully lucid now. She took a tentative crack at the typical, heavy silence imposed by Satsuki's palpable disapprobation.

"What about *your* wounds?"

"Mine will wait. *I* was not stabbed in sixteen places."

A grumble.

If it is restored, will it reboot its plan? Will it choose a different species, after having had to scrap so much of the human race? Or will it lie in wait until humans can grow plentiful again? What happens to this planet if the Seimei Sen'i decide to drop Earth as a project altogether?

We don't know the answers to such questions. What is clear is that, since our failure that night, this world has begun winding down into a slow and painful end. And Ryuuko and I fight, as if we've nothing better to do. Day in and day out in this vast hell, without a clue as to

what we're seeking to accomplish. Are we making a difference? Is there any difference left to be made?

I don't know sometimes… whether we're really fighting, or merely idling away our time.

Ryuuko's worst stomach wound was already darkening the tape that dressed her torso. Satsuki swore, turning her attention from the black eye she'd been intent on. Satsuki asked whether she was even prioritizing her healing on it, and Ryuuko groaned at the reminder; of course she was. The sooner her digestive organs were in reasonable shape and working order, the sooner she could eat; rice was almost all they had available, but Ryuuko's body would restore itself rapidly so long as it had some form of energy to utilize.

Each battle, she takes ten times the damage I do; you would think she finds it a personal failure not to maintain our imbalance to at least that degree of disparity.

And each time without fail, like a wild beast, her recovery takes all of a fraction of mine in time to complete.

But even so…

Enough time had passed. Ryuuko eagerly downed a bowl of rice, ravenous, as Satsuki began dressing her own wounds so mild by comparison.

Matoi Ryuuko…

… *You frighten me the most of all.*

Minutes later, her own injuries tended to, Satsuki was readying another gauze pad at a puncture in Ryuuko's forearm. It was as she began taping that she chose to retract a measured portion of the considerable weight of her disapproval - while the Kiryuuin's overwhelming charisma was not so impactful upon Ryuuko's once-strong spirit as it was to the common masses, its concentrated force

at this proximity, paired with the predominant silence, was easily effective at such times to send the younger girl into a dull, hazy stupor of contemplation.

"You were too reckless again."

"Stop using that-*that* on me. I know already."

"*Ryuuko* ."

There it was - that stern, weighty voice, low and steady as Satsuki efficiently wrapped the outstretched arm from where she knelt behind Ryuuko on the knotted mattress. Even while she was diligent in dressing her wounds, in subtle and unsought apology for having been protected, this talk would have to happen.

"Just because you won't die… does *not* mean I want you throwing yourself into harm's way for me."

"*Mou*," Ryuuko complained, flustered as she tried to dispel the newly accumulating pressure in the air without backing down. She turned her head away, despite that Satsuki couldn't see her face directly; a dust-streaked mirror, slightly crooked on the wall across from them, was plenty of cause for avoidance. "W-well, what was I supposed to do?"

"*Think* before you act, perhaps?"

"*Okay*, Onee-ch- *ouch!* " she yelped as Satsuki tied the tape with a curt snap, before doubling the knot.

Ryuuko heard Satsuki's sigh - another characteristic behavior, that told her she was done tending Ryuuko's wounds. Gingerly the girl swung her legs over the edge of the mattress and hunched over, rubbing her arm.

"I did good, didn't I? We cleared out the nest; what else matters?"

In a flash Satsuki had snaked an arm over her shoulder, dipped her hand between her breasts, and tapped two fingers lightly against the wrap situated over her stomach. Ryuuko sucked in a harsh breath, eyes snapping shut, and in reflex she flinched back, melding against the front of Satsuki's larger body behind her. There was now a separate poke at her forehead; when she opened her eyes on the mirror, her face irate, Ryuuko saw Satsuki's head resting over one of her shoulders; her sister's arm still hung over the other. Her free hand had formed the shape of a gun, its 'barrel' leveled just above Satsuki's no-nonsense glare and with thumb up and two fingers pressing into Ryuuko's temple, pinning a strand of hair in place.

"Do you have a deathwish, Matoi Ryuuko?"

She averted her gaze from Satsuki's emotionless stare in the mirror. For the life of her, for all the times she had held her superior glare in challenge, as an enemy and rival, she couldn't face her down when she heard the inklings of concern hidden behind that impassive mask. "Get real," she tried to scoff, but had been unbalanced in the exchange, and grown uncharacteristically submissive. She lowered her head, a blush on her cheeks as she warmly grasped the wrist of Satsuki's arm draped over her shoulder. "I mean - you just said it yourself. There are some things that aren't possible."

She lifted her own hand, looking at it with a smirk. The weathered skin of her palm grew translucent and brightly veined as she willed it, rousing in the appendage a resented part of herself.

But Satsuki lowered her finger-gun to instead grasp Ryuuko's chin softly, careful not to agitate any bruises. The younger girl was a bit reluctant to feel her sister's warmth receding from her back; more so, there was no subtly avoiding Satsuki's gaze when her head was turned, putting them eye-to-eye as foreheads touched.

"You should know by now… that very few things can frighten me, Ryuuko. But seeing you get covered in wounds, over and over again, is…" She trailed off; however unwavering her authoritative glare, her

jaw clenched, and for many seconds there was silence. "… Be more careful."

"Nee-san…" Ryuuko murmured, cheeks pink. She looked down, hiding her eyes.

Satsuki blinked as the girl pressed a hand to her chest, and slowly pushed her away.

"A human… would protect her sister, right?" she asked. She wore a soft smile as she finally held Satsuki's eyes with muted certainty. "Whatever the pain…"

"Ryuuko…" Satsuki breathed; her expression could only soften. And without warning, the older girl's knuckles were at Ryuuko's forehead with an unceremonious *pop!*

"Ouch!" Ryuuko said with her flinch; luckily they'd been just about Satsuki's arm length apart, but the impact had still been smart. She glared in question.

"Don't use that pain to feel alive. You don't need something like that… to tell you you're still human. Even I can tell you that much."

"Satsuki…?"

"Besides - would you forbid me from also feeling concern for my sister?" The older girl lowered her fist, peering into Ryuuko's bright, enigmatic eyes. "You *are* special, Ryuuko. You're my precious family. So, if you are my little sister, *trust* me."

Ryuuko shut her eyes, quietly abashed, and her face warmed as Satsuki's lips came to her forehead. Though barely a touch, it was several moments before Satsuki pulled away to see the smile trying to work its way through Ryuuko's stubborn pout. Satsuki let slip a sly smirk at the childish expression.

"Trust your big sister to survive," she reiterated, and sobered. "… To survive, and not leave you alone in this hell."

Nothing more was spoken as Ryuuko tentatively wrapped her arms around Satsuki, and nestled her head into the crook of her neck. Satsuki accepted the contact, holding her close, and let a hand idly stroke Ryuuko's short hair.

Nightfall found Satsuki lying on her back, a hand resting on the shoulder of the girl snuggled up against her. Satsuki's other hand, as during every night, resided on the Bakuzan Gako - though the likelihood of any threat sneaking near them unnoticed was meager on a sleepless night.

Truly… What are my fears, beside those of this girl? You didn't used to be one so fond of empty words, Kiryuuin Satsuki.

Yet I know that whatever I say, however confident I act for her, I might die easily, and she will not.

She held up her hand, though force of habit prevented her from relinquishing the short blade. The tremble was miniscule, but unmistakable. It had not always been so, but fighting without rest would wear even on Satsuki's body, as it would that of any human. As it was, even when she accrued a fraction of the damage in each clash, this life they had chosen was harsher to her than it was to Ryuuko. The physical pain was perpetual, even if its extent varied. As the fatigue had crept up on her, so had she learned to drown it out.

I might die any day now… but such existential concerns grow more remote with each departing breath. We cannot live, and even so cannot value mere survival in this forsaken world. Her hand fell.

It would be one thing if Ryuuko were physically capable of dying the death she so desperately seeks in battle; if this girl were to fall protecting me, I would happily follow her to the next life.

But she can't. This beast trapped in the shape of a girl, or this girl cursed to exist as a monster - this is my sister. So I must remain strong… strong enough to survive with this creature, my imouto, and keep her out of pain.

You're all that keeps me going, Ryuuko. Wandering the earth with you and fighting, for some nonexistent scrap of a chance that we might happen upon a path to a new future.

For the sake of alertness the following day, for the sake of survival, or for the sake of not making a mistake that would cost her sister more pain to shield her - for the sake of lasting long enough to find a real future, or for the sake of spending as much of her survival with her last family and comrade as possible - it was for these purposes that Satsuki shut her eyes and resigned herself to rest. She silenced her frenetic rationalization and faded into slumber, momentarily solaced to simply feel Ryuuko's steady heartbeat close by.

-For You-

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End

Beginning at the End of Days

Chapter 2: Beginning at the End of Days

Three years ago, at the dawn of the end, two survivors make their choice. "Let us show them what humans are capable of… and let us also give them hell."

AT THE END OF DAYS

Two \ Beginning - - At the End of Days

"Get up. Stand up, you pig."

THREE YEARS AGO

The figure knelt on the ground started slightly at her arrival, but did not face her - did not so much as raise her head. The long-haired woman had listened to her howl and sob through the night. Now that she'd stopped, it was undeniable truth that all was quiet.

The voice that drifted out from the crumpled figure was raw and hoarse. "… No."

She gave a cry as the sole of Satsuki's shoe met her side, throwing her onto her other shoulder. And she slid to a stop at the classroom wall and lay there, unmoving, her eyes masked by shadow.

Satsuki's lip curled. Turning on heel, she strode away.

"Everything's over, you know…"

She paused at the words that crackled out of a dry throat. A gasped sob fell into the air.

"It's all over, isn't it? They're gone… ! Wh-what's there even left to…?!"

Ignoring her, Satsuki took a steadying breath, and left the room.

The cracked windows of the far wall had grown bright and dark again a number of times before the clack of shoes was heard from the hallway floor outside, and Satsuki returned.

"It's been a week."

"How long do intend to lie there like a dog?"

Pig or dog? Make up your mind, asshole. Better yet, leave me alone!

"Stand up."

Ryuuko's cracked eyes flickered upward, sunken and dull. That face looking down at her again… suddenly it pissed her off, like it hadn't in a long… in what felt like a long time.

Satsuki was silent as she waited. Finally Ryuuko turned onto her front, got to her knees, and shambled to her feet, swaying a moment.

"Happy?" she snarled acidly.

SMACK!

She saw stars, and tasted a coppery tang blossoming in her mouth as she thudded heavily to the ground. Her eyes were wide, mad, as she saw Satsuki expressionlessly lower her hand from the backslap.

Ryuuko growled, and shoved herself toward the taller young woman. Satsuki blocked her punch, and shortly drove her free hand's knuckles dead into Ryuuko's stomach.

After a stunned moment Ryuuko slumped against her; Satsuki caught her, supporting her weight as she clung and coughed and dryly heaved.

"Are you done?" Satsuki asked simply, not looking down at her hunched form.

The younger girl pushed away from her, staggering back, and charged with a yell. Satsuki's kick, snapping cleanly across her face, threw her to the wall again, where her hands twitched blindly against the cracked, musty paint before she promptly collapsed in a heap.

Spitting out a mouthful of blood, she rose brokenly and threw herself again.

Satsuki grasped her arm and turned, launching her over herself and clear across the room, where she crashed into a pile of desks with a boom.

When the dust cleared, Ryuuko was glowering at her from the floor, bitter, gasping in pain. Satsuki regarded her coldly.

"I lost people, too, Ryuuko. Some of the finest people I've known."

Ryuuko cringed at the terse hardness of that voice, turning her head away as her eyes began to water again.

Satsuki persisted, stepping forward. "But if the ones who died could see us now, what would they think of-?"

"What do you *want* from me?! What's there left to do?!"

"Look at the sky!" Satsuki boomed, pointing at the window. "It's blue! The planet has *not* been enveloped in Life Fibers! Maybe we failed,

but we struck a blow. I'm going to determine what's happening, and what else I can do! But I'll need to leave Honnouji to do so!"

"And you want me to tag along?" Ryuuko almost laughed, sardonic. "And what if there's nothing even the great Kiryuuin Satsuki can do? What then?"

Satsuki scowled, eyes narrow. "'What if' doesn't suit you, Matoi Ryuuko."

She turned away. A voice called after her back.

"I said, 'What then'?! What's left, then? What will you do?!"

"I'll survive."

Ryuuko fell silent.

Left alone, she struggled to sit up, the movement as impulsive as her attacks on Satsuki had been. With a strangled yell of frustration, she fell flat. *Too weak…*

Brow quivering, she glared at the empty doorway.

Of course she left. It's not like anything's keeping her; I'm no asset to her now. She doesn't waste time with the weak.

She laughed a bit, almost soundless, as her eyes shut, twitching beneath the lids. The floor was so cold beneath her skin…

Forget her. Screw this world. Screw it all!

I'm done…

I'm gonna… go catch up with the others now, I guess…

"*I don't recall any of the others dying by giving up, Ryuuko."*

That goddamned voice… in my head…?

"… Nor do I recall giving you permission to soil Academy grounds with such an unsightly death."

The clap of water across her face was shocking. Sputtering in confusion, she blinked at the blue eyes above hers. "You… wha…?"

Saying nothing, Satsuki pulled Ryuuko into her lap - and shoved a spoonful of warm rice between her parted lips.

Ryuuko spat automatically. "The *hell* -?!"

Another spoonful came; she bit into the utensil - plastic - and cast it aside, furious. "Crazy bitch! I'm done here! What's it matter to y-?!"

Satsuki's hand replaced the spoon's work, with the addition of then latching determinedly over Ryuuko's mouth until the thrashing girl swallowed. At the next small handful from the bowl, Ryuuko bit down on her fingers in retaliation.

The stern woman's jaw clenched as Ryuuko's teeth tightened with a snarl, but she did not fight to free her hand. She held her mad glare, fiercely resolute.

"You're alive, Ryuuko. Do you hear me? You're *alive!* "

Ryuuko shrank before the Kiryuuin's intensity, eyes wide, but did not relinquish her punishing grip even as her mask of rage crackled with inklings of grief.

"So are you going to run away from this reality, or will you stand with me and FIGHT?!"

Eyebrows drawn inward, Ryuuko shook. Finally she shut her eyes, and let go of Satsuki's fingers.

In a moment Satsuki wiped the tears that had fallen. Ryuuko did not cry anymore.

That day, Satsuki fed her.

The next, Ryuuko sat upright, and downed the food she was brought with almost savage zeal.

Watching her, Satsuki sighed. "And now, at the very least, we survive…"

Ryuuko was thoughtful as she caught this murmur. "… And give 'em hell."

"What?"

"We survive, and we give the Life Fibers hell."

In vengeance? Satsuki wondered, regarding the idle chill of the gaze Ryuuko fixed on her empty bowl. *No… vengeance may well be beyond us.*

The older teen smirked subtly. *Then if only as an act of rebellion… However little it amounts to…*

"Yes… Let us show them what humans are capable of."

Ryuuko made a sound of dissatisfaction. Satsuki quirked a brow at the girl, but with a halfhearted scoff she amended herself.

"And let us also give them hell."

-Beginnings-

End

New Life at the End of Days

Chapter 3: New Life at the End of Days

"Choosing to survive here is like accepting a new life -- a life you didn't ask for or necessarily want, but that got handed to you. A life that ain't all that pretty, in this shitty world… but it's what you've got."

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

AT THE END OF DAYS

Three \ New Life - - At the End of Days

STILL ABOUT THREE YEARS AGO

"When will your next menstrual cycle begin?"

Ryuuko received this with a blank look. "U-um…?"

"It's a simple question," Satsuki remarked, at her confusion. "Or has it already started?"

"I-it hasn't, but…"

"Good. If you know when it should start, tell me, and let me know when it does."

Ryuuko's arms crossed, though her face was red. "I don't know exactly when. I'm not even sure what day today is."

Satsuki sighed, massaging her temple. "Exactly. If you know the date you expect it to occur, we'll know what day it is once you start."

"W-well," Ryuuko said, looking anywhere but at the older girl. "I kept a calendar app on my phone. I don't have the exact starting date memorized when it's still a ways off! The last couple of months of s-school…" *Of school?* What an understatement. The last couple of months had also been the last of human civilization as they knew it. "Well, they were pretty crazy. So maybe I didn't keep track in my head, alright? A-anyways, why don't you just use yours?"

"Mine are a bit irregular."

"O-oh," Ryuuko said, apologetic.

"Plenty of women experience irregularities. Why are you embarrassed? You child."

"I'm one year younger than you, if you forgot! I'm practically an adult!"

"Ryuuko," Satsuki said bluntly, "My memory barely runs far enough to recall the age at which I was more emotionally immature than you are now."

"I'll let that one slide," Ryuuko said, scowling, "but are you saying it's *not* weird to just up and start chatting about periods?"

"Menstruation is a natural process. If we'd grown up normally, I might have even been the one to explain how it works to you."

"Wh-whatever."

A thought furrowed Satsuki's brow. "Did… did father have to explain it to you?"

"It must have slipped his mind," Ryuuko said, an eyebrow twitching. "Now imagine the panic of a boarding school student waking up one morning to find her bed looking like a murder site!"

That actually earned what seemed like a sympathetic look. And… curiosity? "Did you have a roommate?"

"Three. Don't know which one it was that had the guts to go blabbing around school, so I had to kick all their asses- Why am I even telling you this?!" Ryuuko cried, face reddening further as she snapped out of her reminiscence.

"For conversation's sake?" Satsuki suggested, as if it were obvious.

"Yeah, of course," Ryuuko said quietly. She stood, storming away.

Not long after Satsuki had first woken up following the battle, she had acquired a composition notebook from some classroom and begun to write. But apparently, she had found that she did not know the date, nor have a means to check it.

Sometime in March, Ryuuko read, *likely around 13th to 15th.*

Then, in a resolute hand,

One day since the fall of Honnouji Academy…

Ryuuko's brow creased. *That can't be… dramatic flair?* she thought, picturing the Kiryuuin's stern face. Hearing footsteps, she jumped to close the book and shove it back into the duffel bag before Satsuki walked into the room that had been their hideout for the last week.

"Are you ready?" she asked.

"Yup," Ryuuko said, standing and tossing her her bag, before she might notice it had been disturbed in her absence. "Let's get to it…"

As they walked out of the silent train station, footsteps echoing on the steps, Ryuuko found herself deflating as she stole a glum glance at the frigid woman. *Dramatic flair? Yeah, right.*

One day since the fall of Honnouji Academy.

Internet servers are down; landlines and mobile are inoperational. By the alerts that were running before the radio and television stations went down, things are… not going well.

I have no means of attempting to contact others. I searched for survivors, but found only Ryuuko. At least there seem to be no Covers in the area. Did I survive because I was near her? It remains muddled … I can't remember clearly how it happened.

But she is presently intent on being worthless. Her sobs are the only sound in this world right now.

I did not see what became of everyone for certain, and was unable to confirm all their bodies. I know not whether I may have failed to find any in the rubble.

I can write no more. My arms ache from digging…

Nine days since the fall of Honnouji.

Ryuuko was barely back on her feet when I told her of an autonomous Life Fiber entity heading toward us. Though all Covers were driven from the Academy that time, it is not Covers but these inexplicable things that return in their place, seemingly at random.

Ryuuko caught on to the fact that this was not my first time seeing one, and was flustered to realize that I had been repelling these things from Honnouji while she grieved.

We went to fight it together, but though she rushed to attack before I could explain the information I gathered in prior encounters, she found its weak point with remarkable ease.

However…

A metallic clang resounded in the air as Ryuuko's blades cross-slashed through the Life Fiber cluster's… heart?

No, Satsuki decided, running to catch up even as the thing exploded in a shower of light.

'Heart' made it sound too human. These things…

Ryuuko's head snapped upward, eyes wide in shock.

And she made no move as the Life Fiber cluster swelled and leapt toward her.

There's a second one?! Satsuki thought, but a spot in the Life Fiber cluster was suddenly glowing brightly, as if overloaded with power. Satsuki slashed through this second nexus of energy, and the horde of threads moving for Ryuuko collapsed mid-leap, withering at her feet as light went scattering away from them.

Ryuuko's blades dropped from her hands. She grasped at her own mouth with a shaking hand. "S-Satsuki… !"

The older teen sheathed her two Bakuzan blades, looking away. "I know, Ryuuko."

'Core' - that was what she would call them. 'Heart' made it seem too human.

"You know…?!"

'Heart' wouldn't make the task any easier for them.

"That-," Ryuuko sputtered, waving. "That was a *human* powering it! But if it was a human, why couldn't I cut her free?!"

'*Her'?* Satsuki thought, wincing at the crumpled, skeletal heap now left in the dead mass of Life Fibers. There was nothing identifiably gendered about that; even the bones were deformed. By the gods,

Ryuuko's senses were sharp… But Satsuki shook her head at the other girl's terror. "I'm not sure."

The next time they encountered a cluster, Ryuuko made a furious effort not to strike the core until she had a good enough feel of it to sever the parasite alone.

"There!" she cried, bold red scissor blades outstretched from the clean blitz as she turned back, hopeful.

Life Fibers dropped away in fluid heaps, unveiling a humanoid figure overrun with stray bunches of thread. But he was drained and skeletal as he thrashed to pull free; sightless red eyes glared through Ryuuko as he loosed a contorted howl, of pain. When he promptly collapsed in death, the Fibers still clinging to him squirmed a moment, and followed.

Ryuuko shouted, senseless, with raw emotion; she swung a scissor around, and a line of trees twenty meters away splintered and burst. She yelled, stabbing dead Life Fibers on the ground again and again.

"Ryuuko."

A hand on her shoulder, a wild punch, and a masterful counter later found Ryuuko pinned on her front, one of her arms locked behind her back. She swore aloud, but struggled only briefly before she cooled down, eyes shutting, with the feeling of cool grass against her face.

"You tried," Satsuki said. "Now we know."

"… Yeah," Ryuuko said quietly, and felt Satsuki's weight rise off her back.

Life Fibers… beings of extraterrestrial origin that feed on a lifeform's energy, by covering the host. Covers would keep their hosts alive, as

batteries enabling them to operate autonomously.

But the autonomous systems now roaming the land have been seen to simply murder - when they come upon humans, they leech them to death, perhaps rest to adjust, and continue on their way.

So Life Fibers consume and expend our energy, then, but would seem to be poor at storing it in themselves, as in the way animals can store calories and fat. These things - Life Fiber clusters - appear to be built upon one living human used as a vessel to store and concentrate the energy of large amounts of Life Fibers, and the additional human energy absorbed.

It appears that this puts an immense strain on the host body, mutating it significantly. Irreversibly. As we learned today, even given a means of extraction, such a host's body cannot sustain itself once separated from the Life Fibers. Ryuuko is certain she did not cut him when she struck; he simply perished, unable to revert to a functional human form.

What are we up against? Life Fiber zombies? Their bodies only continue to function as batteries, stripped of the 'extraneous,' by being interwoven with Life Fibers. Should I say death was immediate, upon separation? Or are the hosts already dead - a piece of machinery, simply an empty husk good for conducting energy?

What is certain is that destroying a core - the mutated form of the host - effectively collapses a cluster.

Large clusters can (/need to?) manage multiple cores, presumably once the initial host's body reaches some capacity or limit of efficiency. Probably why even systems with the same number can vary considerably in strength, given hosts with variable aptitude/Life Fiber compatibility, and how close each 'battery' is to optimal capacity.

Beyond that, enemy is unpredictable. Their nature has changed, in this new world; we know that they are gathering energy, but not their

overall objective or how to thwart it …

"Hey."

Shutting the journal, Satsuki looked up at the forlorn expression of the girl who had approached her. Not waiting for a response, Ryuuko sat down a meter from Satsuki's side.

"Back then - after we woke up after… everything, you fought off clusters that got too close to the Academy, right?"

Satsuki studied her. "I did. It didn't look like you had any plans of protecting yourself."

"Why'd you do it?" Ryuuko asked, gaze fixed bitterly on her hands in her lap. "They can't kill me. So were you worried about how powerful a cluster I might make, if they got at me?"

"If that were my driving concern," Satsuki said crisply, no more than honest, "I would have destroyed you myself."

"Then why?" Ryuuko repeated stiffly, still looking down as she turned her head away. "Why did you protect me, and why come back for me? Had you spent too much time shaping me as an asset to leave me behind?"

The silence stretched palpably between them, growing thicker until Ryuuko fidgeted uncomfortably.

With a sigh, Satsuki finally cracked through it. "Look at me."

Ryuuko did in a moment, wary. Even facing Satsuki, she still seemed to cower now. But before she could resort to fending off the insecurity with aggression as she tended to, she saw something soften, disarmingly, in the icy eyes that took her in.

"I mourned you once already, you know."

A quick intake of breath. Then, as Satsuki's hand drifted out toward her cheek, that breath caught in anticipation. But the long fingers faltered, and drew away without the slightest touch.

"I learned of your existence and your purported demise in the same sentence. And I mourned a baby sister who'd died like a lab rat before so much as receiving a name I could think of her by… and well before I could have hoped to protect her."

"Satsuki…"

"Throughout my upbringing, I plotted against Ragyou and turned my heart to steel. I learned to live forgoing both pride and shame. But it still hurt to know… It was still a haunting, and humbling, thought. Sometimes, as I trained and prepared, I would pause to wonder - 'Would my strength, even now, be enough to have protected her'? But I knew such musing was meaningless," Satsuki said, with a ghost of a chuckle, as she let her thoughts flow. "Every time, I had to acknowledge that I still couldn't have saved the faceless, nameless infant you would unjustly and forever have to remain to me, and every time, I felt you die again.

"So I decided to save the world… I selected my allies, and trained an army, and resolved to save the world where I couldn't save her. For I understood and accepted that I would never know how she might have grown up; she would never make me smile, or wear on my last nerve; I would never so much as hear her voice, or look into her eyes like this."

Ryuuko's face warmed. All of that, coming in Satsuki's still all but toneless voice, had been quite effective at throwing her off-balance. She pulled her eyes away instinctively - and immediately felt regret for it. "G-geez," she finally said, ducking her head at how high her voice came out. But promptly, if shyly, she found the fond sincerity in the other's eyes again. "I think we've at least taken care of the 'getting on each other's nerves' part."

"Perhaps to an excess," Satsuki laughed lightly, shutting her eyes. "Well, I suppose where Ragyou took an unnamed infant baby sister from my life, fate gave back one churlish Matoi Ryuuko… and all things considered, I'm quite fine with that. I simply never imagined you would be so insufferable," she added, cool tone betrayed only by a slight smile. "Foul-mouthed, an *incurable* ruffian…."

"Bite me," Ryuuko snapped back through the smile fighting its way - rather successfully - onto her own face. She soon sobered, however, settling into a thoughtful look. "W-well…"

"'Well'?"

"Um - I mean, I'm… I'm sorry to have never known you, but I'm here now. I never knew I was short an older sister, but then one super intense, stick-up-her-ass Kiryuuin Satsuki came into my life, huh? And I guess all in all, I'm cool with her, too. S-so… I'm here now. I'm sorry I'm the only one you've got here, but… but I'm here, sis."

Satsuki raised a brow as Ryuuko spread her own arms with a meek smile. "What's this now…?"

Ryuuko's cheeks were lit brightly as she averted her eyes, arms still open. "I never really was that close to my… to dad, you know? I was shipped off to boarding school as soon as I was old enough, and I never really cared enough to try to make friends. I mean - I guess before I'd thought about how things were, the only reason I ever laid hands on anyone was to threaten them or beat them up. And no one messed with me. I figured that was just fine with me… but when I came to Honnouji, and I met Mako, who probably didn't know the definition of 'personal bubble'…"

Her laugh was terse; she looked down, face softening sadly. "I mean - I guess you don't realize how much even s-something as simple as human contact could have meant to you 'til…"

"You could have said something sooner…"

"I didn't know how to just *ask*," she said, flustered. "I mean - are you even gonna hug me, or not?"

Satsuki's arms were enfolding her as she finished the thought; after a surprised moment, Ryuuko snugly embraced her in return, as if she might miss the chance to.

"I'm glad you're here… Ryuuko."

Ryuuko's eyes shut as Satsuki held her, however awkwardly. And she truly appreciated, more than she could ever remember, that simply being able to feel another human's warmth against her body was a wonderful thing. This feeling was precious to her.

This person… she thought idly, lost in cherishing the moment of stillness. *Actually, you're… the reason I'm alive, huh?*

When you came back for me, that time, you decided my life was worth saving… not as the great Kiryuuin Satsuki sizing up assets, but as my big sister… as one human caring about another!

"Ryuuko…?" Satsuki murmured gently, as moisture seeped silently into the shoulder of her shirt.

"I'm here for you now… sis," Ryuuko breathed, relishing the sound of the word as her arms remained snug around her.

"I'm glad," Satsuki assured her again, slowly patting a steadying palm on the girl's quivering back. "However insufferable you turned out. I'm glad…"

Ryuuko surrendered a chuckle. "I'm here now. And I'll stay here with you… always."

SOME AMOUNT OF TIME LATER

Four blades swung around - crimson scissors from low to high, obsidian Bakuzan blades from high to low - as their wielders leapt past each other. Electrically bright red-and-black threads were scattering away as two sharp figures moved swiftly back-to-back again, panting evenly. Ryuuko sneered as Life Fibers swirled and loomed at a distance.

I dunno anymore - how much 'hope' there is that we're doing anything. Making a difference, in this world… do we realistically expect we could do something like that? Did we ever…?

Ryuuko's blades miniaturized to the size of an ordinary pair of scissors, and she reached backward; Satsuki's hand answered the request, clapping onto her wrist and grasping firmly as the Kiryuuin pulled, swinging her around and hurling her toward a concentrated mass of threads.

There's no denying we're a strong team. We're way tougher together than we'd be individually.

Small scissor blades, poised sharply as Ryuuko spun on a true shot through the air, surged to full size to stab into a spot that suddenly burned brightly in the mess of red-patterned black. She slashed outward through the core, sliding past it on wrapped feet as it burst and died with an unearthly howl.

Ryuuko's eyes shut momentarily as she rose to full height. *But choosing to survive here… is like accepting a new life. A life you didn't ask for or necessarily want, but that got handed to you.*

[img: http://orig02.deviantart.net/c5cd/f/2016/010/9/7/r1_by_hinata0321-d9netm4.png]

A life that ain't all that pretty, in this shitty world… but it's what you've got.

She glanced back at her handiwork, adjusting her scarf with a sigh. *But we can do this much. So… I'll gladly protect any human who still has the will to drag on a little longer.*

Miniaturized scissors tucked into the belt of her cargo pants, she headed back toward her sister with a solemn smile. *No one asked to live like this, but it's the lot we drew. So we'll go on living. And like a random-ass sister that fate chucks your way… maybe there's a blessing somewhere in choosing to live through this. Just maybe…*

And if not… maybe I could even live this life just for her.

Maybe I live for Kiryuuin Satsuki now; maybe she lives for me. If so-

Her eyes snapped wide as something flickered across the edges of her perception. She sprang without warning, ramming a shoulder into her big sister to knock her backwards. And Ryuuko met shocked eyes with a reassuring look, in the instant before a column of Life Fibers lanced from the earth and cleanly skewered Ryuuko's gut, carrying her high into the air.

If so… that's fine.

S-so… I'll fight.

Satsuki rolled to her feet in a neat recovery and dashed forward, hacking to sever the skewering Life Fibers at the base. As Ryuuko's feet touched down, the Bakuzan Gako was flashing behind her back, shearing protruding Life Fibers down closer to her flesh; Ryuuko was already gripping the threads at her front, wrenching them free with a bloody cry and tossing the dying fibers aside. And the sisters leapt apart, as the second cluster erupted angrily from the crackling floor.

*I'll **fight.** And I'll…*

Ryuuko charged forward, drawing her blades without breaking stride, blood trailing hotly from her lips as an absolute resolution burned in her gut, shone intensely in her eyes.

I'll protect her-

Until my body is dry!

-New Life-

End

[img: http://orig11.deviantart.net/5f0a/f/2015/171/4/5/at_the_end_of_days__reboot_cover_by_hinata0321-d8xmmy0.jpg]

END OF PROLOGUE

Alternate title considered: Born Again - - At the End of Days.

The Little Things at the End of Days

Chapter 4: The Little Things at the End of Days

There's no shame in enjoying something sweet.

AT THE END OF DAYS

Four \ The Little Things - - At the End of Days

Crouched at the edge, eyes discerning, Satsuki withdrew her hand from the water.

"It appears safe-,"

She'd only begun to turn her head when her sister's figure streaked by to leap with a whoop, splashing into the lake.

When Ryuuko's dark, red-streaked mop poked back above the surface in a few moments, her grin dropped as she caught the stony glower of the clearly splashed Kiryuuin. She chuckled nervously, abashed. "U-um…"

Satsuki smirked. "So - bath time or laundry time?" she asked redundantly, though an amicable twinkle was in her eye as she stood to nudge Ryuuko's pile of discarded clothes with one foot.

The scrappy young woman rubbed her impatient head, smiling. "Well, we do stink!"

"You know what else stinks?" Satsuki snorted, an eyebrow inclining as she peeled off her own garments. "Your sweaty, blood-caked clothes. They could use sewing, as well."

"Hey! Yours smell, too!" Ryuuko protested, pointing. Her hand snapped back to catch the washrag and bar of soap Satsuki pitched her way.

"*I* possess finesse in fighting. Neither my sweat nor blood are shed so excessively." Punctuating the words, she took one long stride away, sprang to plant light feet on the side of a nearby tree, and launched herself elegantly into the cool water. She was slipping neatly into a backstroke as she flitted to the surface, sighing at the feel of the liquid on her skin as she passed a scoffing Ryuuko by.

"I coulda' done that."

"But you didn't," Satsuki snipped back blithely, the words teasing a smile from the corner of her sister's lips. She slipped through the water with poise, long hair trailing, eyes peacefully shut as she took a few smooth strokes back. "You barreled by naked and flung yourself in like a twenty-year-old child, arms upraised."

For this she got a twisted washrag cracked playfully toward her. She intercepted and caught the end in her hand, without needing to look.

Ryuuko sweatdropped sheepishly as Satsuki opened her eyes on her.

"You'll have to do better than that," Satsuki said slyly. "Here, you child. Let me scrub your back."

It was in companionable silence that Satsuki soaped and scrubbed away a light swatch of sweat-scented grime. When this was done, she cupped water in her hands and tipped it down over Ryuuko's neck and shoulders, watching it cut the dirty suds away. Her eyebrow quirked.

"This is a new one, correct?" she observed, tracing the pale, slightly raised line with her fingers. It passed from near the centerline of Ryuuko's back to a shoulder blade, thicker at the flat bone's edge.

"I dunno. Maybe."

"Does it hurt?"

"Nah," Ryuuko said, and dunked herself briefly up to the neck. She smiled back at her sister, nodding toward the rag. "Thanks. Go ahead and take care of yourself now."

Satsuki's nod was almost automatic as Ryuuko moved away - ostensibly, eager to continue enjoying the water - and gave Satsuki her space. This had become the routine; the elder sister would wash the younger, and Ryuuko would not reciprocate.

The long-haired woman looked at her hand. Early on it had been difficult to bring herself to do this much. Had she touched the girl's back so casually just now?

"Ryuuko."

The younger woman paused in her considerate retreat, and found herself catching the washrag again. Satsuki spoke before the bold flush of resolve might desert her.

"I'll trust you with my back."

Ryuuko's confusion cleared, and she nodded appreciatively.

"You're stiff as a *board* ." The exclamation came almost as soon as Ryuuko brought the soaped-up rag to Satsuki's back.

"H-hogwash. I have more - and more toned - muscle than you; of course my body seems hard."

"There's toned shoulders, and then there's turning your back into a twisted lump of flesh…" Ryuuko said, ignoring the usually effective jab at her scrawnier frame. "I'm amazed you can even swing the Bakuzan Gako."

"A starving tiger will never fail to strike when it must."

"Hmph…" Ryuuko relented, seeing Satsuki's back quiver once as she scrubbed carefully. "… Hey," she said, pausing.

"Wh-what?"

"You okay?"

"Of c-course. Why do you ask?"

"You're stuttering, for one thing…"

"Nonsense."

Ryuuko gave a nondescript sound, but otherwise went about the task in silence.

Satsuki's face was hot, with some lingering reflex of shame. Her shoulders did ache, even though Ryuuko was making a clear effort to be gentle. But it was not pain that caused her hiss after Ryuuko rinsed some of the soap from her back, and rested her fingers directly on Satsuki's bare shoulders.

They simply remained that way for several moments. Then, when Ryuuko felt Satsuki's breath resume, she pressed her palms into her, and gave a light, experimental rub. Another press came, a bit firmer. It continued tentatively, as if Ryuuko massaged her with acute consciousness of the thin ice onto which she'd hazarded to tread.

When Satsuki's quiet panic hiked in a gasp, the hands flinched away.

"I-I'm sorry. I thought it would help…"

"Ryuuko," Satsuki said quickly, without facing the voice at her back. She blinked in amazement as she put her thoughts to words. "It was… not altogether so unpleasant."

Her fingers, hanging partially in the water, stirred no ripples. The twitching that had grown perpetual…

The wet rag was draped across her shoulders; then Ryuuko's hands returned to her back, her touch indirect through the barrier of ragged cloth. That was… a bit better. Even the consideration itself was some comfort. Satsuki willed herself to relax. *She's trying to soothe me…*

Can something like this… be enjoyable…?

Ryuuko's voice was softly flat - stern, without being disaffected or unkind. "Let me know if it feels weird."

"Of course…"

"I mean it. Tell me, and I'll back off."

"I know you will."

With the words, and the truth in them, Satsuki physically felt the loosening of a strain she hadn't known she was bearing up tight. She let out a sigh as this particular wad of tension melted away from the base of her neck.

I can entrust my back to you. I've seen the scars you accrue for watching it.

It was far from everything, but it was a start.

Even if the world is rotting… Even if I should break in battle…

This trust… this moment… is something that will not be taken from me.

"Hey - do you see that over there?"

"Where?" Satsuki asked, wringing out her long hair.

"The far bank…" Ryuuko pointed, squinting. "See, in those trees? You've got better eyesight than me."

"When was this established?"

Ryuuko shrugged. "Well for one thing, though *I'm* a bit of a special case, I kinda figure that most Hounnouji students, getting regularly bombarded with your majesty's radiance, must have taken a pretty good hit to the eyesight…"

"Ryuuko, I cannot physically blind someone. I can only project my presence to subject other humans to a psychological-,"

"And on the flipside," Ryuuko was continuing, heedless, "given your years of practice looking down at Honnouji's peasantry from waaaaay up high on that big-ass tower- Whoa!" she cried as Satsuki kicked her cloak, bundled on the ground, in an impressively accurate shot for her head. She twisted to dodge, but slipped on the muddy bank and sprawled into the water again - underwear and newly dried hair and all.

Klutz! Satsuki thought, standing as Ryuuko rose from the water. Before she could consider apologizing, she was splashed with a great deal of water. "Oi!" she protested, raising her arms before her in attempt to block another retaliatory splash. "Don't be a pest - you *know* my hair takes longer to dry-! Why, you *brat!* "

The day was still young; she supposed there was no harm in idling a bit longer here.

SPLASH!

Ah… What would *the students of Honnouji… my* soldiers *think of this conduct?*

For the moment, she put that out of her mind. Back in the water, she slapped a handful toward her laughing adversary. For now, she was

intent on teaching her younger sister the foolhardiness of having challenged Kiryuuin Satsuki to a splash battle.

"Sweet - it is! You see it - I mean, you see it, right?" Ryuuko asked eagerly, a hand shielding her eyes from the sun.

"*Yes*, Ryuuko. I confirmed it for you when I could see and identify it a minute ago, when we were yet further away." Satsuki ran a hand through her re-drying hair, opting not to draw focus to the fact that her eyesight had indeed just been proven almost laughably - if coincidentally - superior. Still, she let a cool smile play upon her features. *We've finally found something nice…*

Further along the lake's shore sat a small cabin, so moss-covered and well into disrepair that it had likely been long since abandoned by the dawn of society's collapse.

Beside it was a pair of leafy trees speckled brightly with ripe oranges.

Satsuki chortled softly as Ryuuko took off, running ahead to stop beneath them and scoop fallen oranges from the long grass into her hands. "Today, we feast!" she proclaimed, turning back to Satsuki as she brandished the bounty.

The older sister, nearing at a walk, couldn't quite be irked by the flare of Ryuuko's childish streak. When they scavenged from dusty, already-looted grocery stores and empty homes, they generally came away with rice, pasta, canned foods and preserves; anything fresh, and anything perishable, would have long since given to rot. To find fresh fruit was fortuitous indeed…

Ryuuko was collecting a few fallen oranges that were still good by the base of a tree, pitching overripe ones aside. Seeing Satsuki stop near her, she smirked. "Check this out," she said, as the palm of her hand seemed almost to flush red. Satsuki blinked as the younger woman pressed her hands to the trunk, and clambered up like a

squirrel before slipping nimbly onto a branch. Shaking it, she sent a few oranges down as Satsuki automatically darted to catch them, lest they bruise.

Ryuuko landed at her side as she set them down. "This should be plenty… What did you do to your hands?"

"Feel," Ryuuko said, holding a hand out and looking quite proud of herself. Satsuki ran a finger from Ryuuko's fingertip to palm, noting a curious but smooth texture. It was in attempting to trace in the reverse direction that she frowned in surprise. The skin felt rough that way, difficult to brush. Then the red tinge faded, and Satsuki's finger slipped along easily as before.

"Your Life Fibers…"

"They're versatile," Ryuuko said, marveling at her hand. "I made little hooks, see?"

The same hands were rubbing my shoulders, earlier… Satsuki shook her head. "Did you used to be able to do that?"

Ryuuko gave an odd look, but shrugged. "I mean - I never particularly *tried*…"

"So you've been practicing? Or…"

Sensing her sister's disappointment that Satsuki hadn't shared her enthusiasm, Satsuki shook her head and offered a soft smile. "Forget it. Let's eat."

Ryuuko's expression was one of bliss as she sank her teeth clear through the peel and into her first orange, spraying a bit of juice and chewing slowly. Satsuki paused in peeling an orange, to observe her. *Even the peel?* she thought in silent mortification, thoughts confirmed with a subconscious shiver as Ryuuko swallowed and then bit out another orange chunk.

Eyes shut, she swallowed the bite happily. "Awesome!" she sighed, drawing out the word in a high voice. Her feet swung idly as she got a dreamy look on her face. "If only they were a touch more sour…"

Satsuki scoffed. "What, would you prefer we had stumbled across a patch of lemon trees?" she asked sarcastically, popping a neat orange segment into her mouth and smiling agreeably at the taste.

"Well, yeah. Wouldn't you?"

Satsuki was allowed to choke only briefly before Ryuuko, face stark with concern, whacked her strongly over the back. She nearly fell off the branch they were seated on; catching herself, she sent the dislodged bit of fruit successfully down the correct pipe and, eyes never having left Ryuuko's terrified face, burst straight into laughter.

It was at first the typical, polite laughter that Satsuki permitted of herself on the rare occasion that she both happened upon such a state of cheer and was not averse to displaying it. Ryuuko's concern faded, but as she was sighing in warm relief Satsuki's genuine laugh rolled out freely, at a volume and tone that made the younger woman's jaw drop.

"Wh-what is it, you fool?" Satsuki gasped out, voice pleasant as she wiped her eye and caught her breath.

"You - you got the old man's laugh."

Satsuki froze. "That's ridiculous, Ryuuko. I can barely remember Souichiro-san's face, let alone his laughter. And I never met the 'Doctor Matoi Isshin' who raised you…"

Ryuuko shook her head adamantly, a grin on her juice-smeared mouth as Satsuki munched another of her impeccable orange segments without incident. "So maybe you didn't pick it up from him, but you still *got* it. Heck, I barely even knew him… well, and then what I did know turned out to be his weird alter-ego disguise - but it's not like I heard him laugh too often either. But when he did, well… I

guess that much of him must've been real, because it just fell right out of your mouth. Of course the voice is different, but… it's distinctive. Totally obnoxious, too," she added, eye twinkling.

Satsuki was not altogether sure how she should feel about that - about these words from her clumsy sister, or the embarrassed smile of affection that said Ryuuko wasn't quite sure, either.

So the Kiryuuin didn't worry about the 'should,' and let the feeling turn up the corners of her mouth. "You don't say?" she said, tousling her sister's short hair to mild complaints.

This day has been utterly wasted, she thought, as the rational part of her inevitably noted the late-afternoon sun.

But the part of her that was busy mussing up Ryuuko's damp tresses, with fingers that didn't tremble, realized with some surprise that she didn't care. Perhaps the day had not been a complete waste, then?

Alright, she decided at last. *Even if we should simply relax here, unproductive, until the sun sets… a day like this must be alright, once in a while. Yes…*

Even now … or especially now …

There was no shame in enjoying something sweet.

-The Little Things-

End

Discord at the End of Days

Chapter 5: Discord at the End of Days

All in all, for both of them, there was a point at which trading blows became less painful than trading words.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

AT THE END OF DAYS

Five \ Discord - - At the End of Days

"I'm sorry - what?"

Satsuki's eyebrow twitched as she glared, stony blue meeting fierce blue. Her sister knew how she loathed to be made to repeat herself, particularly so when Satsuki was confident she had been heard quite clearly.

Now that the situation was relatively secure - this had to happen now? The last two weeks had been trying enough; a routine Life Fiber hunt had dragged on in an area with an unexpectedly high concentration of powerful systems, resulting in a string of battles with little rest. They were often attacked multiple times in one day - or night. They had gone for too many days sleepless but for stolen minutes of tense rest as they alternated in a constant watch. They had lost their bearing somewhere along the line. The amount of food they had brought along had dwindled out and been depleted in the wilderness, far from any known place they could rest and restock. Hunting for meat, cooking, and scavenging was nerve-wracking

under the constant threat of predation by wandering Life Fiber clusters.

The sisters had quickly enough gone from seeking and hunting the enemy to staving off a seeming inevitability, one hauntingly threatened by desperate circumstances - but to top things off, upon reaching a safer area, finding their way, and trekking to this hideout, they had found most of the supplies and food stockpiled in it had been looted at some point in their absence.

Now - now Ryuuko's head was down, but not in acquiescence to Satsuki's instruction; she returned Satsuki's gaze with muted intensity smoldering in her own, her jaw set stubbornly. The challenge could not have been clearer.

The older sister's brow furrowed subtly as she perched her chin atop a bridge of long, interwoven fingers. In deliberately irking Satsuki, and in adopting such an aggressive posture as she stood with her back to the dark-blue uniform hanging on the wall, Ryuuko was already treading onto dangerous ground. It took only these simple few signals for her to express brazenly that on this matter, she was unwilling to budge.

Since stark disagreement ran counter to the instinctual interest the sisters placed in preserving the last reasonably stable human relationship remaining to them, few arguments had a chance to kindle beyond a stray, ineffectual spark before older sister or younger assented, however reluctantly, or a consensus was otherwise sought and met without incident.

But this friction was already grating to an extent beyond that which the majority of their arguments would reach. Two sets of blue eyes were quietly searching each other. Satsuki had two options now that Ryuuko had declared her stance as unbending; one was to divert the conversation - in effect, to submit - and let them move happily enough along.

Instead, she quirked a brow and hazarded to deliver the repetition Ryuuko had demanded only in challenge. Her voice was slow and clear; her younger sister could hardly respond so indirectly as to request clarification again.

The flint was getting more and more shots at the metaphorical kindling.

"I *said* to discard that thing, Ryuuko. Destroy it."

"*Senketsu* is not an '*it'!* " Ryuuko snarled back, but Satsuki heard a tremble in her voice, glimpsed a flicker of hurt in her eyes. She did not want to intensify the conflict, any more than Satsuki wanted to hurt her to begin with.

It was unfortunate, then, that Satsuki had no choice.

She had found it curious, for quite a while, that upon finishing a routine sensory scan of their surroundings Ryuuko would more often than not adopt a wistful smile, and send the deadened kamui a look. Satsuki did not want to be responsible for depriving Ryuuko of those warm, nostalgic smiles, however sad they were.

But for Satsuki, reason preceded sentiment. It had to.

"*Think*, Ryuuko. If you are able to so easily detect its Life Fibers resonating with your own, it is all but doubtless enemy Life Fibers can detect it as well."

One of them had to be the rational one.

"And you know as well as I do that we cannot simply leave it behind or hide it away." Satsuki's teeth clenched briefly. That Ryuuko had not only hidden the fact that Senketsu was so readily detectable, but had worried so ardently for its safety… Satsuki could not help that she sounded critical. "It is for the very attribute of the kamui that draws their scourge to it - that it spent months feeding on your blood and absorbing scores of Goku uniforms. But instead of worrying

about the abundance of power any stray horde of Life Fibers stands to harvest upon locating and assimilating it, your fear is in your precious uniform being torn to pieces-,"

"He would never want to be a part of them," Ryuuko defended. Satsuki's eyes did not miss the brief shiver of the younger woman's hand at her side. "I won't ever let him suffer the fate of losing who he is!"

"Then destroy it," Satsuki groaned. "It's simple!"

Ryuuko's eyes were dangerous as she took a step forward. "You'll stop calling *Senketsu* an 'it,' damn it-!"

The air around Satsuki seemed to thicken dramatically, and grow bright - energized, and violently so. Ryuuko flinched back, momentarily dazzled. Whether the projecting aura was to be considered cruel or resolute, its threat, its chill, was glaringly unmistakable. Though Satsuki's head was lower from where she sat cross-legged on the musty mattress, she could easily enough remind Ryuuko that her will was not to be taken lightly.

Ryuuko tore her eyes away - an incredible feat in itself. "Stop using that shit on me… !"

Satsuki didn't let up. "I fought alongside Senketsu once as well, when he served as a valuable ally. But it is no more. A kamui that does not awaken and cannot fight - do you suppose it feels a thing any longer?"

"He would never draw the enemy to us…"

"I am done hearing of what he *would* do with 'his' own will. As it is now, it is nothing more than a woven bundle of pure Life Fibers, locked in stasis, that can potentially be detected by our enemy."

Satsuki did not put any thought to rising, smoothly, to her feet. She now boasted her superior height as well, as she captured and held

Ryuuko's embittered glare.

"It is worthless to us at best, dangerous to us at worst."

The logic was sound; there was nothing to dispute.

Back down. Back down…

But there was something dangerous awakening in the depths of Ryuuko's pained eyes.

Back down…

It was overpowering the instinct to avert conflict, just as logic had trumped Satsuki's. And it was parting the normally crippling pressure Satsuki could impose, brushing it aside as if to send it rolling off Ryuuko's straightening shoulders.

For fuck's sake, Ryuuko!

"Enough," Satsuki hissed, not giving so much as an inkling of her shock. "You will dispose of it, or I will do so myself."

Ryuuko's eyes grew as Satsuki's hand slipped onto the hilt of the Bakuzan Gako ever-present at her hip.

The scissors were in the younger woman's hand in a flash. Stern eyes held wild ones as the miniaturized weapon flickered about deft fingers, spun - and lodged one of its blades into the solid ground between their feet. Satsuki heard the bare flooring crack.

Now you've done it…

"Outside," Ryuuko said, her voice abruptly calm as chaos crackled in her eyes, practically burning in her posture. "*Now* ."

A blaze.

Satsuki could say nothing before Ryuuko stalked past her, bumping her shoulder and pushing by unapologetically as she did. For a moment Satsuki continued glaring into the wall, through the space her sister had been. If she were a person of poorer self-control, she might have screamed; if she were a person of less pride, she might have chosen then to complain at the unfairness of it.

We were like oil and water from the start; it's inevitable that we cannot always resolve our differences so neatly.

It *was* unfair, and Ryuuko knew it. But their ritual was perhaps also only too well in accordance with the way of this world. What mattered at present was that she not show fear, that she not back down in the face of escalation, like a coward who spewed words lightly. Suddenly, that was the task before her.

For a good while after the point they first met, after all, fighting had been the extent of their relationship - their sole means of relating to each other. Did old habits die so hard? Or was this truly the best means they had of working things out? *If so, we're pathetic.*

When Satsuki took a breath and turned to follow her sister, she was startled to find that the girl remained in the doorway across the room, looking back - studying her.

The roguish grin Ryuuko flashed her accomplished the momentous feat of ushering a slow but certain, shuddering chill down Kiryuuin Satsuki's spine.

"You're worried about 'our' safety, right? But the only one of us all that capable of dying out there is you. Lingering there so long… you're not losing confidence in your strength *now*, are ya', sis?"

It was like a physical blow, and a harsh one. It had *hurt* Satsuki, no more or less than Ryuuko had known it would. But the cheap jab served the purpose, in the way only such words of challenge could, to lighten Satsuki's leaden feet.

It was true: Ryuuko *knew* her, just as Satsuki knew Ryuuko.

The long-haired woman scoffed. *You child…* "Low blows, already? Aren't we in a hasty mood?"

The short-haired one snorted, and swaggered down the steps outside knowing Satsuki would be close behind.

They were at war, and however little it showed, this fact was acutely unpleasant to them both. Thus it was that it became priority for resolution to be reached, by the only truly satisfying means they knew.

This blaze - now that it had come to it, the sooner they killed this splintering blaze together, the better. Right now, it was the one true enemy to them both.

The will to feel no more of their bond compromised, their love, in jeopardy - it was with this that Satsuki lifted her head and strode through the door.

I am strong.

Because I can remain *strong… for you.*

You child.

Ryuuko's warlike nature was perhaps a souvenir from her days as a vagrant, joining up with gangs, picking fights out of boredom, and readily, almost casually slapping a target on her own back wherever she went. A large deal of her history before this world went to hell could be summarized by the fact that she shook things up.

The effect on her of now spending each day watching their backs and powering through the frustration of fighting a battle with no end in sight, against the seemingly insurmountable entity that served for

their foe, was the triggering of her innate aggression at often unpredictable times.

No - she watched Satsuki's back, for fear that she might leave her, and would watch it for as long as Satsuki still expressed the will to keep living by her side. Ryuuko's own back needed little in terms of watching, after all. Protecting her sister's (if only relatively) fragile life had become her means of doing something, her surest expression of a reason for being, and thereby added some fortification to her own tender, ache-prone sanity. But the stress of maintaining that life grated on something sharp, jagged, and unforgiving in the deepest recesses of her heart.

Stress, among other things, grated the flint. Discord struck it surest.

For while Ryuuko loved her big sister, a quieter but inescapable part of her, forever smoldering beneath the floorboards of their relationship, steadily resented her.

These sorts of flare-ups were messy, angry. Here it had been sparked by passing disagreement, dangerous in itself, between two who existed together whilst acknowledging neither particularly as their leader and *usually* having no need to. And as per her combative spirit, on such occasions that words proved insufficient for bringing them to an acceptably swift resolution, Ryuuko expressed dominance through physical prowess.

Combat.

Letting a rift go unchecked would be death, in this world. Or worse, solitude. All in all, for both of them, there was a point at which trading blows became less painful than trading words.

Humans no longer ruled this world, if they ever truly had. In a landscape dictated by survival, this was as good a means as any for quashing disputes.

It was thus, by such bewildering logic, that Satsuki was the only human Ryuuko was willing to lay a hand on in this world, despite the typical anxieties and reservations Ryuuko might feel since discovering her own unique and advantageous physical composition - and pinning down certain impulses accompanying it for what they were.

For Ryuuko, a seemingly haphazard exchange of physical diplomacy was an acknowledgment of Satsuki's great strength among humans, and a testament to her trust in her sister to not regard her as a monster. For Satsuki, it was a time to show that she could watch her own back - to reassure Ryuuko that she was quite strong, and that she had not lost the will to survive with her.

Still such intricacies of crafting a controlled blaze, deeply understood by them both, were never spoken aloud. For now, they were to fight. On the surface, that was all.

Under other circumstances Satsuki might have scoffed at Ryuuko's stance, which in another world could as easily have belonged to a *bousouzoku* 1 thug, but while it was rough, it served its purpose; Ryuuko's power, despite her lack of any formal training, was nothing to make light of. Meanwhile, she sneered back at Satsuki's polished stance in tattered garb; drilled into her bones, it too was a remnant of an old world, a world in which a familial dynasty of sorts had demanded that the successor to its lineage hone her body to the pinnacle of human potential and train to mastery in an assortment of martial arts. She was a weapon, every bit as much as her younger sister, yet she was a purely human one - and for the veritable monster squaring up across from her, she was the worthiest opponent alive.

"Ready, princess?" Ryuuko shot through bared teeth.

"What do you think?" Satsuki scoffed crisply, and was within one moment blocking a cracking blow before her face. Her foot flashed out. Ryuuko dodged, and the two broke apart.

In their next exchanges they tested each other; while the flurries of intensity made the air shudder and sing, already well exceeding the scope of any duel between ordinary humans, to these two it was a light and courteous greeting, traded in the rush of ringing blows. Ryuuko smiled at Satsuki's concentrated face as they danced. As a minute passed with neither having landed a clean hit, Satsuki knew better than to be lulled by the gentle pace. Ryuuko would not let the cautious warm-up routine drag on forever, and if the younger woman wound up being the one to escalate it, Satsuki's already dim chances would plummet.

So when Ryuuko flashed an obvious opening, Satsuki sensed her impatience and struck for it - and pulled her fist short, instead smashing a solid kick into Ryuuko's side.

The younger sister could barely yell before Satsuki tore into the weakness, with lightning precision and cool ferocity chaining a string of blows that left Ryuuko doubling over in pain - and harshly laid out on the ground by a snapping kick to her face.

Knowing better than to presume her victory secured, Satsuki was quickly upon Ryuuko again, driving a foot down for the prone girl's face.

However well Ryuuko could take a hit, she tended to become a much more manageable adversary with a broken nose.

It was a flash - Ryuuko twisting aside, her arms darting about the ankle - and with bewildering speed Satsuki was hitting the ground on her front, as Ryuuko's weight planted firmly on her back. Satsuki could barely register her ankle being tucked under Ryuuko's arm before pain went shrieking up from her hip, and burst from her mouth in a yell.

"Give up?" Ryuuko offered when she could be heard.

"N-no," Satsuki gasped, and pressed a hand to her own face, suppressing a cry as the captured leg was wrenched again to an

unnatural extent. This was the type of cutthroat fighter Ryuuko was, when she scrapped with humans barehanded; with no particular style, she would take any opportunity to drive her opponent's power into the ground, and seize for victory. In her own way, with a seemingly bottomless bag of tricks, she was savagely effective.

You think I can be defeated so easily?! Satsuki thought, face reddening in outrage. With a yell she thrashed through the pain, bucking Ryuuko's weight off of her, and in the moment the younger girl was unbalanced Satsuki shoved with her free leg to flip sideways and break from Ryuuko's hold.

Satsuki scrambled away, and rose to her feet. Her hands were catching a punch before she reached full height; she grimaced at the sting that shot through her calloused palms and shuddered up to her elbows, as she caught another fist with a clap.

What…?

Then Ryuuko's movements blurred - and with greater speed than Satsuki could register, a punch was buried deep in her stomach. A rough sound was shot from Satsuki's throat. The pain was blinding.

There's… no way-

CRACK!

A strike to the face bowled Satsuki to the ground. When she struck down, her reaction was to roll out and control a slide on her feet, though she was powerless to rise above a crouch. As she came to a halt her knee dropped down, and she gasped and hacked in shock.

Ryuuko was physically strong - more so by far than any ordinary human - but not *that* strong. Unless…

Satsuki's wincing eyes widened.

How much…

How much do you usually hold back against me? Ryuuko?!

Her vision blurred, focused - on her own hands, shaking on the ground before her. She looked up, and met the dispassionate glare of the girl who stood tall. Then Satsuki's world darkened.

Idiot …

She swayed to the side.

Is this… truly all I could do…?

She only just glimpsed it in her listing glare - the sparkle of disappointment, edged with despair, glimmering through the ice blue electricity of the younger woman's eye.

Then the world snapped to focus. Satsuki flung out an arm to catch herself - and hurled herself at Ryuuko.

"*Who the HELL do you think you're holding back on? HUH?!* " she shouted, as her elbow connected with Ryuuko's nose in a wicked crunch.

I am not defeated! I have not given up!

Satsuki got a grip on Ryuuko's shoulder as she charged into her; yelling out, she lifted Ryuuko up, and flung her heavily on her back to the ground. The short-haired girl rolled to her feet with a groan and backpedalled, dodging one strike before receiving a staggering uppercut to the jaw.

We're going to survive together, right? So I haven't given up on you!

Satsuki ducked neatly under a sloppy swing and sent a zinging jab to Ryuuko's abdomen before flicking a sharp hit up toward her face. Her scowling adversary blocked. Ryuuko diverted and wove from the path of her calculated strikes, eyes wide and shining, sweat flecking from her brow. She could barely throw an attack back edgewise.

On walking with you! On fighting alongside you!

Satsuki's passing knuckles grazed Ryuuko's cheek.

On laughing with you!

The heel of her palm met Ryuuko's gut firmly enough to make her lurch.

On tasting oranges with you-!

Satsuki's foot arced around for Ryuuko's head. The girl hopped backward, curtly slipping from her range, her bare feet barely having left the ground. And in the moment they began to touch down again Ryuuko sprang sharply forward, returning with redoubled intensity to plow a flying knee clean into Satsuki's cheek.

Light and dark spots skittered rapidly across her eyes; her mouth was pushed open as the force strained her neck to the side. Blood trailed past her lips.

She sailed a few yards, staggered, staggered. Ryuuko closed again before she could gather herself, and struck her again, and again, tearing on without relent. The bludgeoning crack of Ryuuko's fists meeting her body grew sharper still; jolts of searing pain drowned out all else. Satsuki did not want to wonder how much more she could take. She withheld a cry as a backhand punch caught her ribs, harsh, and clenched her teeth as Ryuuko drew back again.

"S-sto-!"

The traitor thought had almost leapt past her lips before her breath fell short, silenced. In Ryuuko's eyes, Satsuki was not weak, like most humans; the Satsuki that Ryuuko sought was not a person who would ask for mercy, but the indomitable Satsuki of the past. She was a human who could take anything Ryuuko could dish out, and for that reason, Ryuuko felt mildly safe around her.

Cursing her own pride, Satsuki prayed that Ryuuko was right, and received a concussive blow about the eye.

It didn't stop when Satsuki could no longer keep her feet beneath her. Ryuuko followed her to the ground without pause, straddling her sides and striking her face again. They never did set rules for declaring when a match was over. Ryuuko would pummel her for as long as she pleased, and Satsuki would not cry foul. But it was unusual for Ryuuko to carry on quite so long, when the outcome was certain.

Satsuki could not fight, so she endured.

This intensity… this isn't just about Senketsu, is it? Are you frustrated that I can't keep up any longer? No… there's more…

There was more, surely, as Satsuki could feel a passionate rage in her sister's sharp fists, could glimpse between vicious blows a somehow mystified, yet flickeringly malicious, look on Ryuuko's face. Ryuuko was laying herself bare. When she did, Satsuki was willing to serve as an outlet.

Yet she understood that there was something seriously wrong with Matoi Ryuuko, and it might never be within Satsuki's power to fix.

We can mow down Life Fibers for days on end, but even so…

Does some part of you hunger for human suffering? The feel of your fists striking into warm flesh?

Then strike. I can *handle it, because you believe I can.*

For if such an impulse were turned loose on ordinary humans*…*
Well, we can't have that, can we?

Indeed - at least for the time being, Ryuuko was only capable of striking uninhibited *because* she understood that her sister was the only one who could take it. So Ryuuko struck, until the tape on her

fists was slick with blood, until the fury abated and diminished to a dull buzz in her skull. It was then that the inexplicable urge to strike at last fizzled and burned itself out. She was left panting for breath.

And as Ryuuko blinked blearily down at the other woman, vaguely aware of a throbbing ache in her knuckles, sweat stinging hotly in her eyes and broken nose stopped up with blood, Satsuki reached up to her - grasped at the back of her skull, and slammed Ryuuko's head with her own, earning a harsh yelp. Her eyes were combative, alive with her roaring resolve as she hissed six slow words.

"*Kiryuuin Satsuki yields to NO ONE!* "

This was Ryuuko's Satsuki - the Nee-san who would never fall, who inspired others with her strength, and then with her tenacity if strength failed her. This was a Satsuki who would survive.

The two spent several moments eye to eye, breath labored, the older sister's sneer unflinching and somehow predatory.

Then Satsuki's body trembled and gave out. Her hands fell, with no strength left to speak of, and her eyes rolled aimlessly, freed of conscious constraints. Her back struck down, pushing a short breath from her bloody lips in the instant that nothingness claimed her.

The blaze had been let out in the open, and run its course. However dangerous the process, it was settled. Now that Ryuuko had worked the impulse out of her system, she would feel safe again for a time; the risks were a cost of prolonging their existence in this world, and a price the sisters were evidently still willing to pay.

Satsuki would wake up with her wounds cleaned and tended to, and a fresh appreciation for the sheer physical and emotional unpleasantness of quarreling with Ryuuko. And Ryuuko, as she did each time she 'won' in such a manner, would remain thoroughly disgusted with herself for a few days.

Naturally, once things got back to normal it would be impossible for even the surest of passing sparks to catch on anything for some time.

It was thusly and simultaneously determined that Senketsu would stay.

-Discord-

[img: http://orig00.deviantart.net/7508/f/2016/010/b/2/discordflatst_by_hinata0321-d9nf2er.png]

End

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1. Literally "Running Wild Clan"; name for delinquint biker gang subculture associated with illegal motorcycle customization, reckless driving, and troublemaking/brawling.↩

Alternate chapter title considered: Conflict Resolution ( ) at the End of Days. It ain't pretty, and it's certainly not all that healthy, but let's say at this point in the post-apocalypse, this is what conflict resolution has boiled down to for these two.

Peace at the End of Days

Chapter 6: Peace at the End of Days

Comfort with showing weakness might just come with knowing how strong you really are.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

AT THE END OF DAYS

Six \ Peace - - At the End of Days

Satsuki sometimes shook in her sleep.

Even if not generally so much as her older sister, Ryuuko *was* a light sleeper; if Satsuki were a lioness, an apex being that had adapted only relatively recently to utilizing the full breadth of her sensory capabilities to anticipate threats from without, Ryuuko was a stray cat - sharp and long since habituated to the threat of predation. The two regularly slept in close contact, primarily (though by no means solely) simply to fend off the cold.

But presently it was not a threat from without that troubled Satsuki. Ryuuko knew, with some sadness, that external threats were simpler for her older sister to face; similarly, Ryuuko was not so helpless to shield Satsuki from feral Life Fibers. Those could be cut down at the swing of a blade.

Still, the short-haired girl did not think deeply on any of this just as she awoke, as if her registering the absence of bodily danger to connect to her rousing let her remain groggy where she might otherwise easily spring to alertness.

Thus it was thoughtlessly that, sensing the upset state of the woman whose side she had been snuggled comfortably up to, Ryuuko sat up, frowned in concern, and touched Satsuki's shoulder.

In the moment the long-haired woman's eyes snapped open to find a figure in their unfocused yet intense path, and her face was twisted by a jarring mixture of terror and rage, Ryuuko understood her mistake profoundly.

THAM!

An ordinary woman, suffering the brand of nightmares that often plagued Satsuki and woken - even by a light, innocent grip on the shoulder - to find a figure looming over her, might have screeched or flailed or blindly kicked. And while Satsuki withheld any vocalization to accompany the fury radiating from her eyes, the foot that lashed out in semi-alertness connected squarely enough with Ryuuko's gut to launch her clear into the room's ceiling.

The younger woman's ears rang as she felt, with as much awe as bewilderment, the cracking of the surface that had met and buckled sharply behind her back. Her breath vanishing in a shriek, she caught Satsuki's livid expression as gravity began to reclaim her amid tumbling bits of paint and debris.

You might not be 'like me'…

… but you, Kiryuuin Satsuki, are plenty far from 'normal.'

Satsuki tackled her as she neared the ground, straddling Ryuuko, pinning her on her back as she drew back a fist, half-mad, and growled through clenched teeth:

"Kiryuuin Satsuki yields to NO ONE!"

FWHAM!

Ryuuko took three blows silently. Then at the fourth she shifted her head, letting a fist crack deep into the flooring beside it.

"I know that, Onee-chan," she said through a busted lip, gentleness permeating her characteristic gruffness. "I know."

The eyes she held widened. Satsuki's rage evaporated, and confusion - then recognition - shone starkly from her sharp features.

"My Onee-chan is hella' strong, after all," Ryuuko said, a smile on her bruised face. "I know that."

Satsuki's brow quivered. No apology was demanded by a face of such soft understanding, so she gave none. But still remorseful, she hung her head, letting long hair fall down around Ryuuko. Her face would have been thus hidden to eyes anywhere but where Ryuuko now lay beneath her, as Satsuki let fall quiet tears.

The woman had never cried, before the Earth became this way. She had obediently submitted to her tormentor's games, feigned loyalty, bowed to her nemesis, and endured her personal hell. All the while the hidden flame of rebellion had kindled in her heart, waiting, so patiently waiting for the proper moment to flare up brilliantly and have her goal realized. But she had never cried. She had made her pain her strength, crushed shame beneath resolve, and shown the world a dignified leader's stern mien, and never shed a tear for herself. Kiryuuin Satsuki had not permitted herself such a luxury, such weakness.

If this was the one way her sister had 'weakened,' Ryuuko would accept it. She showed as much by spreading her arms in a patient invitation to the woman whose shaking hands rested on the floor, near but not in contact with Ryuuko's shoulders. After such an episode, Satsuki might cling ever closer to her sister or decline contact for a while altogether. Ryuuko did not pretend she could begin to understand factors Satsuki herself did not, but she would accept either choice without question.

Satsuki loved her dearly for that.

Thus it was easier each time, perhaps, to fall as she did, as if collapsing for a moment of accepted weakness into the arms that welcomed. Ryuuko embraced her quivering form, shushing.

'Am I like her?' Ryuuko had once asked in a taut voice, hurt but trying to conceal it. 'Does it… h-hurt you, to be stuck with someone who shares not just her blood, but the Life Fibers?'

Satsuki had snorted then. Ryuuko would never possess an aura so foul. It was why in these rare times Satsuki could accept Ryuuko, the one for whom she most yearned to be strong, as an outlet for her pain, her fear, her weakness.

Satsuki's pain was her strength; this Ryuuko understood on a more intimate level than their mother ever could have hoped to. For where Ragyou's exertion of power over Satsuki (however ultimately ineffective) had been to humiliate, conditioning her to submission to curb her own will and control her, Ryuuko fought to affirm and reaffirm that Satsuki's spirit did not wane, if only by stoking and enflaming her fighting spirit in a way only a trade of fists with Matoi Ryuuko could.

'Family' was coming to mean something more to Satsuki now - more than a mother who had been a monster and a father who had left her a mission and left her behind. In this vast hell, 'family' meant more and more significantly the bullheaded little stray who gave her a reason to rise in the morning, and fight another day.

It was slowly undoing years of stifled self-doubt, suppressed fear, personal pain hidden and stamped down by necessity.

It was perhaps her final triumph over Kiryuuin Ragyou. Indeed, it may well be her final, small triumph over the despair of this dying world.

Kiryuuin Satsuki was healing. She was allowed to be a mere human, allowed to acknowledge what had ever silently broken, and messy or not, she was putting her rough pieces together while everything else was winding down. She knew this was what her little rogue loved to see most of all; she felt it as her younger sister rubbed her back thoughtfully, emanating a light, soothing hum as Satsuki's eyes wettened her shoulder.

Satsuki was healing, and even if it occurred in a world not sunny but ashen gray, not peaceful but crumbling away, and overcast by the perpetual shadow of death, it was one more thing to keep them going.

-Peace-

End

Alternate chapter titles considered: "Old Wounds" (or "Healing" (. Crossed Old Wounds off first, because though this chapter remains a bit dark, I wanted to stress the idea that though it's not perfectly pretty and happy, this is what one type of 'peace' looks like now. Obviously, then, Healing works less to highlight this idea since healing old scars could be a painful process in any setting. Finally, this being a bit of a complement/companion to Discord, I chose the (kanji) spelling of peace which can also mean 'harmony.'

Faith at the End of Days

Chapter 7: Faith at the End of Days

A most curious human has a most curious story. "They said a new world needed a new religion. So they gave God a new face, you see."

Warning: Mentions of religion and evolution.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

AT THE END OF DAYS

Seven \ Faith - - At the End of Days

Sweat stung her eyes; she bit her lip as the moisture flecked from her nose. Her extended fingers barely brushed the handle in their next flailing pass.

It was a medkit. By the logo on the half-shattered glass casing about it, it had to be. On scavenging trips, Ryuuko would scour an empty building room by room, drawer by drawer, box by box, thoroughly for as far as it was accessible; people often stored useful treasures - lighters, dental supplies, medicine - in odd places. Whatever they hadn't taken or destroyed amid the frenzy of the early days of apocalypse, Ryuuko would find. The work was slow, but occasionally rewarding, for the experienced forager.

But the telltale cross emblazoned on a fragment of glass - a case fallen from a wall - promised that the bounty below would be no

haphazard check among dozens of cupboards to be rifled through. It posed a certain reward: a treasure chest beside the chance quarter on the sidewalk that was the reward of random searching. You could scour sidewalks all day and not find one goddamned coin. But one box with that little logo…

Her nail tried to flick the folded handle upright. It wouldn't budge. She stretched a bit further with an annoyed grunt, unblinking.

She could hack, slice and dice Life Fiber clusters all day long, but in some ways, she knew she was powerless. Hell if she knew where to find a hospital or refugee clinic she could guarantee would be operational the next time they swung by, or even, reliably, where to find other people. She herself knew almost nothing of medicinal herbs or other remedies.

So if Satsuki got sick, Satsuki could easily die. Ryuuko couldn't fight something like illness off her sister; such a killer could claim Satsuki, and laugh at the fool left behind.

And some of the medicines in their stockpile were past expiration. It would only take one time Satsuki really needed it for weakened medicine to not do the job.

So, for such a promising box, Ryuuko was quite willing to go out on a limb - or rather, clamber down across the crackled, sharply drooped remains of this floor to reach for a box resting on the floor below. She was in the basement levels, the bowels of a rickety Western church. What little cracked, worn carpet remained she dug her feet and hand into, upon flooring curved into a downward slant sharp enough to reach almost the next level down. That next level, however, had caved more entirely; Ryuuko could see the box sitting on a barely-intact chunk of floor at the corner, but aside from that - blackness. She had little desire to test how far down it went.

Ryuuko pulled back her hand, scowling. She nipped her thumb.

Her eyes grew.

She reached down again, hesitating for just a moment. Satsuki would probably have scolded her for this… or worse, remained silent, while that unnerved look showed through her cold eyes.

But the tips of Ryuuko's fingers reddened and protruded, poking into the form of claws.

Little more… She hooked the handle and tugged. The box rose but slipped from her reach, beginning to tip from the ledge supporting it.

Crimson claws split at the tips, splaying desperately into a web of threads that leapt clumsily to snag and encircle the falling box.

Ryuuko gave a shout, as much in surprise as with the effort of pulling back to sling the box safely up to her side. Her steadying foot slipped on the incline, and she swore and slammed her other hand, now sporting its own claws, into the slanted length of flooring to catch herself again, flopping to a halt.

"HA!" she laughed in triumph. Now, time to scram-

Crack.

A small sound, and terse silence.

Then the slanted floor lurched down and gave out, as weight tore it from its remaining support.

Ryuuko seized the medical kit tightly, and shot a few Life Fiber strands upwards. The glowing threads arced toward an intact piece of flooring and caught, jolting her, before the support crumbled down, and Ryuuko plummeted with it.

Curse her - curse the god-forsaken little monster pipsqueak of a sister who grew so alarmed to hear that Satsuki had a *headache.* A headache! It was probably the water from yesterday; it had tasted odd.

When Ryuuko had heard that same dismissive remark from Satsuki earlier today, her eyes had gone round in panic.

Was it so difficult to comprehend that Kiryuuin Satsuki would be felled by neither headcold nor minor infection? Yet however much she insisted this, Ryuuko would spare no caution for her. If Satsuki could only get her to show such zeal for preparedness as she rushed into battle, scissor blades swinging…

When they'd split up for a routine scavenging trip, Satsuki had *expressly* warned Ryuuko not to do anything foolish. Her stern glare had been met with the typical uninterested, casual "Yeah, yeah" and a wave.

Satsuki eyed the scissor blades jammed into the ground before her. It was outside what looked to have once been a church. Ryuuko had probably detected no danger, and thus left the weapon to avoid being encumbered or risk losing it.

She had also marked her location.

Ryuuko was going to be *hella'* late getting back to the meeting spot and Satsuki.

But the Life Fiber signature faintly resonating with her own was too curious to pass by.

The fall hadn't done her much damage, aside from landing her a bruised tailbone. She'd emerged from a pileup of rubble in a thrash, swearing irately, blinking in the near darkness. The floor there was earthen; the space grew cramped as she ventured out. Tunnels, then…? Had the floor collapsed into some kind of mine?

She now passed a larger cavern by, following the tunnel's course toward the pulses. Satsuki would call her a fool among fools for winding up here, let alone progressing weaponless; indeed, she'd gone far enough that she couldn't be beneath the church anymore -

and was that fresh air she smelled? Either way, Ryuuko knew there was a system to her Life Fiber senses. Pulses this faint and subdued meant a presently dormant cluster, and a distant one, at that. That was why…

That was why she almost jumped, when she heard the sound from just ahead.

A human! she realized in that typical, lip-wrinkling twinge of anxiety crossed with relief, making out a voice as she crept nearer. And there was light ahead… Ryuuko listened, following her ears and eyes, satisfied that the pulses were still distant and unmoving.

"…'The God that holds you over the Pit of Hell, much as one holds a Spider, or some loathsome Insect, over the Fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked.' *So dreadfully provoked*…"

The voice was calm, dully reflective. Ryuuko's brow furrowed. As her eyes adjusted to the light up ahead, she spotted the back of a figure in a cloak, seated beside a tree. Dark hair, short but messy.

"…'So the Bow of His Wrath is bent, and the Arrow made ready on the String, and Justice bends the Arrow at your Heart, and strains the Bow. It is nothing but the meer pleasure of God, and that of an *angry* God, without any Promise or Obligation at all, that keeps the Arrow one Moment from being made drunk with your Blood.'"

Ryuuko stopped at his side and considered him warily - this rambling kid with the light, subdued tone. He blinked, turning his head idly from the sunset; his eyes were wide and earnest in a pale face, and he started when he saw her. Even his expression of startlement was subdued.

He tilted his head. "They said a new world needed a new religion. So they gave God a new face, you see."

Ryuuko's frown deepened. She walked to one side of him, then the other, arms crossed in suspicion. The pulses were still so weak, now

that she tuned into them again. But their direction as she moved about, double- and triple-checked…

"You're… like *me*," she breathed, stunned.

He stood up, and Ryuuko hardly began to take a stance before noting the slackness in his posture. He wasn't much younger than her, she realized; he was a bit taller, but lanky and reedlike - malnourished.

"We're the same?" he inquired. He studied Ryuuko, a brow raised. She raised a brow right back, scowling. Then he grinned, softly fierce. Shakingly proud. "We're the same. That's what she says, huh… Then were you also rejected by the Harvest?"

Ryuuko wasn't sure how to respond to that one.

Before she had to, he swayed, slumping against the tree as his wavering intensity evaporated. He was murmuring.

"What?" Ryuuko asked. "Dude, snap out of it!"

"Scars," he repeated, bespectacled eyes peering up at her face in confusion. "You have scars. But ordinary injuries don't scar us, I found. Even fatal injuries don't. So… No, you…? You *fight* the Creator?"

She felt a chill as he spoke, turning his pinched gaze toward the sunset as he covered his mouth with a hand, appalled, then looked at her again. There were people in the world who babbled shit like this? He had to be too young to be one of them. But… the ones she fought… *creators* ?

He gripped her shoulders, more supporting his wobbling frame than restraining her, and gave an airy laugh. "'What are we,' they'd say, 'that we should think to stand before Him at whose Rebuke the Earth trembles?' Yet you fight! Alas, the Sword of divine Justice is every Moment brandished over our Heads, and 'tis nothing but the Hand of

arbitrary Mercy, and God's meer Will, that holds it back. Tell me, warrior, what think you of that passage?"

"*I think*…"

That voice was as steel. The gangly youth didn't flinch as the Bakuzan Kouryuu pierced the air before his neck, poising its sharp edge at his throat. Or rather, it took him quite a few moments to notice Satsuki's - and her blade's - arrival. He started somewhat when he did.

Satsuki's voice was a growl, each word cold enough to singe. "The only sword you need to fear brandished over your head is mine."

He released Ryuuko's shoulders as Satsuki coaxed him back a few steps, the tip of her blade leveled at his throat. "Wait, wait… who…?"

"This here's Onee-chan," Ryuuko provided.

"Oh. Hello, Oneechan," the boy greeted with a smile, as if taking a cue from Ryuuko's calm.

"No, she's *my* - agh," Ryuuko groaned, running a hand through her hair. "Sis, I don't think he's a threat."

"*I* think you're a terrible judge," she snapped back. To the boy: "Identify yourself."

"Oh, I'm Yoriyoshi. Shin'yuu Yoriyoshi. Well met!" he said, and promptly tipped backwards, keeling, until his shoulders and head conked into the dirt.

( )

[SHIN'YUU YORIYOSHI]

A firm eyebrow rose at the youth sprawled on the ground.

"What the hell!" Ryuuko complained, reaching into the pack on Satsuki's back. "You know normal people can't handle your intensity at close range!"

"What are you doing-?" Satsuki asked, turning abruptly to get Ryuuko's hands out of the backpack.

Ryuuko went for it again. "He's starving-,"

"Ryuuko!"

The next the younger woman knew she was against the tree with a thud, a hand tight on her wrist having twisted her arm upward behind her back. The flat of the Kouryuu rested at her throat. "What are you thinking, Ryuuko? The town was almost uncannily well cleared out. Unless you found a stockpile, we *don't* have food to spare."

Satsuki saw it flash in her eye, and braced herself. They both knew Satsuki wasn't actually strong enough to keep her pinned, if Ryuuko was determined.

But Ryuuko looked away. Her words were soft and clear. "He's like me, you know?"

She heard Satsuki's intake of breath, and pulled her hand free without resistance.

"You remember that week last winter, when we were short on food? I started acting weird. I felt different - like I wasn't a human, but some… thing, attached to a human body. Like I was just drifting around… I thought I was going nuts."

Satsuki nodded grudgingly. Ryuuko continued.

"We hypothesized-,"

"We did, did we?"

"*You* hypothesized," Ryuuko corrected with a look, "that the more the human part of me is jeopardizing my chances of survival - through the undersatisfied need for food, for instance - the more active the Life Fibers get." She hung her head. "It was *scary*, sis. This guy's probably only alive right now because the Life Fibers in him are keeping him functioning. That's why he's loony - you'll see. Once he's eaten, he'll probably turn back to normal like I did."

Once he'd eaten, he was still rather loony. Or at least, his story was.

He'd woken and downed two cans of soup ("Four servings," Satsuki noted stonily). But he was up on his feet, walking without swaying, and Ryuuko considered it a good sign. That he was also Japanese, and had seemed to assume 'Oneechan' for Satsuki's name earlier, just went to show how much more out of it he'd been.

Ryuuko still decided that Shin'yuu Yoriyoshi - his given name spelled with the same characters as 'freedom' - had a smile entirely too steady for the story he offered.

Ryuuko sat down on the weathered stone wall she'd been walking along, gazing down the grassy hill below. This area was rural; cities meant places where there had been more humans, and more chaos, at the onset of the end. Humans all but gone now, but leaving behind more destruction, more hazards, more to rot and fester with disease. Plenty had killed each other looting and fighting for provisions before the Life Fibers had come for them. The countryside - small villages like this one - was usually ideal for scavenging.

And apparently, this particular village had been essentially devoid of REVOCS clothing at the time of the fall. Ryuuko couldn't figure how often it happened, and couldn't imagine there were many entire towns that had been like this, but she guessed it had to happen somewhere. Even REVOCS's radar had to miss some spots*…*

As Ryuuko sat, she heard the Yoshi kid stop where he'd been walking in the long grass a few paces uphill from her perch, but even

knowing he kept a dagger on his person, she didn't feel uneasy at having him out of view. She could feel the calm pulse of his Life Fibers, a hum of resonance with hers.

Moreover, she also knew that though out of earshot, Satsuki's militaristic gaze was trained on them from the top of the hill - the ideal scouting location of the area, naturally - at least one sword no doubt drawn in excessive precaution. The pointedly disinterested Kiryuuin could be upon them within two seconds at a full dash.

Ryuuko rested her chin in her hands. "… So your *whole* village?"

"Every last man, woman, and child," Yoshi reiterated.

"No one ran?"

"Not a one."

"No one fought? No one hid, no one prepared?" Some time ago, Ryuuko's voice might have cracked under the weight of the words. At this point, she had seen in a few years so much death and decay - so many shriveled, skeletal bodies clinging to each other with despair etched into the lines of their bones - that she spoke glumly. Even her disbelief at the unique circumstances was a flattened phantom of shock. "They just went on about their lives, until…?"

Yoshi rested his elbows on the wall beside her, and nodded.

Ryuuko scowled. "Practically a mass suicide, huh…"

The boy shrugged. "My father was the head - of the old church, and then the… new. You know what he said, with ma's hand in his, and my sister at his side, when it was reported that a roaming Life Fiber cluster was finally spotted a day from town, heading this way?"

"Did he call for a celebration?" Ryuuko asked sarcastically.

Yoshi gave her a blank look, and quirked a brow.

"Holy hell!" Ryuuko swore.

"People need hope. When conventional hope is drawn from reach, and a group gets fixated on a replacement… well, odd things can emerge."

"But the people here… made a *religion* of submission to the Life Fibers?"

"Certainly, they deified and worshiped them. Is it truly so surprising? Consider this. For so long, so many humans regarded our existence as a dominant species in this world so conveniently as proof of some creator's divine favor. They decided to believe we were special, sculpted in the lord's own image."

He gazed idly into the twilight clouds. "Then humans learned of pesky things like evolution, and felt so tragically deprived of this lofty self-importance; we were apparently products of a mindless, aimless mechanism of natural selection, of adaptation to a dynamic environment, and however momentous the time it took, we ended up this particular way by chance. Apparently, we were not fundamentally different from common beasts! The mere thought proved offensive. But at long last, a new answer emerged in the wake of more than a century of despair."

"… The Life Fibers," Ryuuko muttered.

He nodded. "It had been well-substantiated as theory: evolutionary natural selection is an algorithm and produced us, but is not an algorithm *for* producing us. Within our knowledge, it couldn't have been; thus humans couldn't name themselves the preordained apex of all life. But just imagine… if Darwin, in his studies, had caught wind of the Life Fibers' hidden design, what shape would human vanity have given the discovery?"

A chuckle escaped him. "We see in this era of apocalypse the ultimate paradigm shift. Humans *are* special again - there was a will behind our creation, after all, and not for some murky purpose, but a

plain one. *Telos.* The beasts now called 'humans' were selected in an ancestral state and then refined, created as we are for the express purpose of being consumed by Life Fibers. We have been optimized for their nourishment. It's only natural, then, that some of the more zealous-minded would submit to the will of our newly-discovered creator, perceiving a sacred duty - and not the sort of glorious missions reserved for a few chosen elites, but a genetic responsibility unifying all humans, equally achievable and inevitable to each and every one of us. Taken from this angle, a grim fate becomes a cause for celebration… I can understand the appeal, at least."

Ryuuko scoffed. She was naturally distrustful of any words that came out of a braniac's mouth; that someone could even admit as happily as Yoriyoshi had earlier that he'd spent most of his young life voluntarily cooped up in libraries had made her cringe enough. But with this twerp - well, she might've just wanted to test how he'd respond. "So they cultivated us for their use. And? *That* gives them divinity? People never considered themselves the gods of cattle."

"Ah, but if cattle comprehended their origins?" he countered. "We owe the Life Fibers our existence, and our ability to reflect upon it. If anything is sacred…"

Ryuuko frowned as his expression clouded, troubled. But ultimately he simply shook his head, chuckling again.

"Don't worry. I might have memorized the doctrines like the rest of them, but I hate the Life Fibers for this reality. I'm not a fighter; I didn't try to resist or anything. But I daresay I should prefer to have been born a beast, than a thinking creature resigned to such a 'purpose.'"

He sighed. "It's a curious thing, human faith. Generations of thinking humans have come and gone without the 'privilege' of serving their purpose. Now with the Life Fibers' harvest of us comes the notion that we've crested our full potency as a species - *we*, the humans of *today*, standing at an otherwise indistinguishable zenith. There is an

endpoint, given a creator to define one - there is 'perfection,' and we've evidently reached it. The awe and wonder of this revelation… *that's* what spurred the advent of a new religion."

"You talk about humans like you've forgotten you're one of us, Yoshi-chan."

He smiled. "And I envy you, Matoi-san, for being able to say so confidently that you *are* one." His gaze flicked back to clouds now edged in starlight. "Humans seek superiority - obsess with it, even. Superiority over other species, superiority of beliefs, superiority of race, of gender, of nation. And they… *we*, humans, seek our gods' acceptance, favor, and love."

"It just so happens," Ryuuko said carefully, "that the Life Fibers' acceptance comes in the form of sucking the life out of us."

"Yes. So to the believers - to the people of my village, and perhaps others like them - their fatal embrace says that we are great and fine beings, worthy of becoming one with the Creator. It's so simple…"

His fist clenched and unclenched. "Yet I wasn't taken by the Purpose. I came to, surrounded by what was left of everyone, with Life Fibers infusing my body. Should this say I am unloved by the Creator? Deficient, flawed - a defect they couldn't properly ingest? Or could they sense the treachery in my heart, shivering amid the hordes of avid believers so eager to submit?" He snorted, though he was pale. "As if they could be so discriminating…"

Left surrounded by the corpses of people you cared about… or in my case, of people who sneak their way into your heart before you notice it… We have one more thing in common, don't we now. Ryuuko sat straighter, stretching. "You're not sorry they all died without you…? But you sound like you realize all this 'purpose' and 'creator' talk doesn't add up somewhere." Her lip quivered a moment, and she hugged her knees, gaze listing aside as she kept from ducking her head. "Me and Nee-chan know a thing or two - well,

Satsuki knows it more than me - about having a 'parent' who doesn't deserve the name."

She paused, looking forward again, and her jaw tensed. "Last I checked, human society didn't generally take to condoning child abuse. Why should an abusive 'creator,' who only wants to exploit us for its own designs, be one bit different? The Life Fibers don't have any more of a 'divine right' to us than humans try to give them. And gods that let shit like this happen…"

A bubbly smile, a soft brown bowlcut head, darted through the back of her mind, and was gone. The face, but not the eyes. Never the eyes. There was no getting herself to try to remember the light in those.

She swallowed down the bile threatening to rise in her throat, getting a hold of herself as she shivered with rage. "There are no gods in a world like this one. If there are, I can't forgive them. Not the Life Fibers, and none of those good gods, either. So, no - we ain't rolling over for them."

He smiled that placid, sad smile again. "But whether we can abide by a god's manner or not, power is power. And the Life Fibers certainly have that much. Even one of the texts that was adapted into our doctrine - that which cautions of our Creator's might, and our own powerlessness before it - was hardly employed to depict the Life Fibers as benevolent or charitable. We taught of dire and severe consequences for resisting the Creator's will. Condemnation, for questioning the teachings… well, that at least is not so unusual…"

The voice that lilted out of him had a shadow of a melody; it was somehow whimsical, as it spouted from this curious creature's smiling lips.

"… How about this?" he was musing, a sudden twinkle in his eyes - or perhaps it was a reflection of the stars. "If the Life Fibers are gods, does that make you and I demigods of a sort - or messiahs, or prophets perhaps?"

Ryuuko couldn't hold back her bark of laughter. "Bakayarou - this is the kind of crap that keeps you up at night? 'Demigod,' huh… That woulda' been a nice rep to have on my side in the gang days…"

"You joke, but I think I'd be terrified, you know? If being a demigod came with some sort of responsibility…"

"Only if you actually buy into that divinity stuff, I'd say. Anyways, I've always just gone my own way. I don't feel any more particularly responsible, so there can't be anything too special about me, yeah?"

"That's… one way of looking at things, I guess. You know - you're quite refreshing to be around, Matoi-san."

"… Why do I get the feeling that you say that while looking at me like I'm some kind of simpleton?"

"H-huh? N-not at all-!"

"One too many stutters there, bastard!" she snapped, springing up on the wall again as he backed up and waved his hands sheepishly, never losing his disarming smile.

Ryuuko lowered her fist, laughing. Laughter… it felt strange just now, but then again, this whole discussion had been strange. "Forget it. I can't stay mad at you, lucky punk."

"Phew! That's good to know, Matoi-san."

"But drop the 'Matoi-san,' would you?"

"I could… try?"

"You're irritatingly well-mannered for being at the end of the world, you know that?"

She eyed him despite her teasing, watching his closed-eye chuckle.

"Yoshi."

"Hm?" It was a lyrical sound.

"Join us. You may not have been a warrior, but you're infused with Life Fibers now. I bet you can fight."

His eyes were open now; she held them with a serious look, and stretched out her hand.

"Let's stand together, as humans, and fight them!"

He smirked, but shook his head. "'Though Hand join in Hand, and vast Multitudes of God's Enemies combine and associate themselves, they are easily broken in Pieces: They are as great Heaps of light Chaff before the Whirlwind, or large quantities of dry Stubble before devouring Flames.'"

"… So, I'm getting the distinct impression you ain't taking my hand."

He rubbed his neck, looking appreciatively up at the deflated Ryuuko. "It's a chilling thing. I can't quite say I believe the Life Fibers are to be trifled with. I saw the drained corpses of everyone I can say I ever really cared about-,"

"Stop smiling," Ryuuko breathed. "You don't have to keep smiling - not while you're saying that. If you're sad-,"

"We can't beat that. *I* can't beat that," he went on, beaming, though his eyes were shut. "But I refuse to worship and love them; as you said, to do so would be to indulge in twisted love for an abusive parent. So all I can do is be resigned to go, when I do, cursing their existence, and hope they comprehend the hatred and resentment *burning* in every fiber of my being."

He had opened watery eyes above his smile. He gave a broken laugh, climbing up on the wall and turning to glare into the expansive night sky. "You hear me? I hope my soiled life force is the most disgusting, rancid meal you ever take!"

Ryuuko watched in the silence following the proclamation. His fists shook; he panted as liquid fell, sparkling, from his sharp chin. "You're a coward," she said.

"I never claimed to be more-,"

"But you're also not a coward."

"H-huh?"

The kid had hope in those watery, trembling dark eyes that had seen too much. Hope - something Ryuuko and Satsuki rarely dwelled on any longer.

"You don't believe, like your folks did," Ryuuko observed, "but you still have hope. Your own hope. Why do you…?"

The waifish youth glowed, with something certain. He slipped down from the wall, and his shivering abated with his grin. "I hope, if just to spite it. I'll smile and laugh and hope in this world for the rest of my days, to show how human - how *real* - I am. I'm not going to merely survive, like an animal. Even simple philosophizing can only take me so far… It's *hope* that truly makes me something more, but… it's also hate, I guess."

He looked up at her, nodding to himself. "If I alone decide it's my purpose to curse the Life Fibers with ten thousand times more *resentment* than the devoutest believer had *love*… that's something, isn't it? It *has* to be… That's what I believe."

Ryuuko leapt down from the wall, and hugged him.

-Faith-

[img:
http://orig11.deviantart.net/211b/f/2016/010/c/f/yoshi2st_by_hinata0321-d9nf1qd.png]

End

Quotes from Jonathan Edwards' sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God"

Wrath at the End of Days

Chapter 8: Wrath at the End of Days

"The longer the Stream is stop'd, the more rapid and mighty is its Course, when once it is let loose."

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

AT THE END OF DAYS

"*The Wrath of God is like great Waters that are dammed for the present, and the longer the Stream is stop'd, the more rapid and mighty is its Course, when once it is let loose… You are every Day treasuring up more Wrath."*

-Jonathan Edwards, 273 years before the Fall of Honnouji Academy.

Eight \ Wrath - - At the End of Days

"Ryuuko-san, you've injured yourself again!"

"Huh… Oh, this? It's a shoulder wound," Ryuuko said as if it were less than obvious, tapping the back of her opposite hand near the bloodstained gouge in her shoulder. "As close to 'nothing' as it gets."

"That 'nothing' is *bleeding*," Yoriyoshi said, brow furrowed. "Badly. Here, let's get that cleaned up."

Satsuki, walking from the recent battlefield with Ryuuko, would never have admitted to being lightheaded from the fight; their efforts had

seen a stray Life Fiber cluster satisfyingly to oblivion, same as always. Her exertion had been effective. She would not complain of trivial fatigue, when Ryuuko's own blood had again spilled to spare Satsuki any real injury.

But at the scrawny boy's words, Satsuki's momentarily idle gaze snapped from wherever its unfocused path had fallen as they walked, and landed almost harshly on him as he shrugged off the backpack.

"That won't be necessary," Satsuki said coolly, less so a statement than a leaden command.

Yoshi flinched as the imposing aura hit him; Ryuuko quirked a brow at her sister's stony demeanor as the Kiryuuin accepted the first-aid kit promptly offered. She couldn't see any satisfaction in the long-haired woman at her effect on the kid, but that didn't guarantee it was absent.

Satsuki angled a more formidable set of eyebrows right back at the younger woman. Ryuuko twitched, and averted her eyes with an annoyed sound as she plopped herself obediently down in the shade of the cracked wall beside them.

Yoshi, a full minute after being released from Satsuki's pressure, rebooted his senses to realize he wasn't sure why he was so shamefaced. Shivering, he shook his head. "Are you sure you're alright? Is there any way I can help?"

Ryuuko could have sworn she felt the briefest pause in Satsuki's methodical, efficient stitching. Teeth clenched, she tried not to shake; even with the mild numbing agent from the first-aid kit dabbed on, she resented getting sutures. It was out of a sense of irony, if not her lack of fondness for needles. Getting sewn up like some ripped shirt…

She bit back a hiss, and when a hand touched the fingers she'd dug into the dirt, she grasped immediately.

"You don't have to pretend it doesn't hurt, you know," Yoshi said sagely, gentle. "Isn't that what you told me?"

"Whatever," she muttered, blushing. But the gash in her shoulder - it was long. They'd really gotten her good. She was happy to keep talking, distracting herself with the stupid look on the kid's face.

"Quit worrying like an old bag," she said. "It's one bad wound. I'm conscious, and I can even walk. I've had plenty worse."

Yoshi winced, eyes glittering with concern. "That's… A person shouldn't be getting torn up day in and day out, resilient or not."

"I said I can take it-,"

"But doesn't it hurt? It heals up, but it still *hurts*, right?"

Ryuuko's silent glare was answer enough for his persistence, as Satsuki finished up the needlework.

Yoshi frowned. "Please… if you have to fight, could you at least try not to be so reckless?"

Ryuuko looked down. Her voice, when it came, was another mumble.

"I could… try. Oi!" she yelped as Satsuki tied the bandage over the stitchwork with a snap. The scowling older sister rose abruptly to her feet, and strode away.

"Hey!" Ryuuko called, standing as well. "Satsuki-!" Realizing she was being ignored, she started after her with a curse, leaving a befuddled Yoriyoshi behind. Ryuuko waited to catch up, though, following Satsuki for a minute before she sped up to grab her shoulder.

She was surprised when the long-haired woman stepped crookedly, stumbling to brace herself against the wall at their side. How weary was she…?

Still Ryuuko frowned. "What gives? What'd I do?!"

Satsuki's dark eyes were fierce. 'Unhand me,' the look said - a short warning.

Ryuuko did, and crossed, her arms. "He's *trying*, Sis. Even if he won't fight, he carries the supplies - he *would* help us with first-aid-,"

"That's not it."

"Then what is-?"

"Nothing. Why are we babysitting a liability that only wants to tag along and watch from the background?"

"You're not making any sense! And that contempt for weakness… !"

"I've never had contempt for the weak. How could I? Do you know how weak humans are, Ryuuko?!" she snapped. Her voice calmed, though her fists remained tight. "… What I cannot tolerate is one who does nothing. One who will not grasp his own fate."

Ryuuko looked unsatisfied. Satsuki sighed.

"No," Satsuki said, suddenly weary. "I neither like nor trust Shin'yuu Yoriyoshi. Those things he sometimes takes to babbling - the 'doctrines' - someone hammered those into his little skull so firmly he could probably recite them in his sleep."

"He doesn't even agree with them."

"But he can't help believing them." She paused. "Such devotion to the Life Fibers, as his fanatics showed…"

Ryuuko's face darkened. "Is it how… how she was?"

Satsuki's nod was almost imperceptible. "The Kiryuuin Clan… its history, its teachings…" Trailing off, she shut her eyes. "Forget I said anything."

Ryuuko cocked her head to the side. "Eh?" she said in a moment. "Don't tell me just like that, you're fine with him?"

Satsuki eyed her; then her fist met Ryuuko's forehead with a pop. She managed a smile at the yelp she earned. "Even I know my discomfort is unfounded. And it *is* fortuitous - miraculous, even - that we happened upon this boy," she said, watching her pouting sister rub her head. "Perhaps Shin'yuu Yoriyoshi is a godsend. If, one day, I mess up badly enough… if I leave you *behind*… I won't be leaving you *alone* -,"

Ryuuko's arms were locking snug around her. The girl hid her eyes in Satsuki's shoulder, but her occasional trembling could not be concealed.

"Dumbass," she spat, gasping. "Don't talk about stuff like that. Don't even *think* stuff like that. I'd rather you hating his guts for the rest of our days than tolerating him for such a crappy reason."

Satsuki's eyes softened, very subtly, as she returned the embrace. "Okay," she said. Leaning against the wall behind her, she sighed and rubbed the smaller girl's shaking back. "Okay."

"Have you seen Yoshi?"

Satsuki looked up from her work of clipping her nails short; in a moment Ryuuko dropped silently into the room from a hole in the ceiling. Her look was worried.

"Not since earlier," Satsuki said, raising a brow.

Ryuuko swore, pacing the aisle between rows of benches.

The old church, while broken down as most buildings, was stable enough on its main level. It was spacious, it was decently secure, and the cushioned benches were in good enough shape to sleep on. Thus a house of worship had been selected as their temporary base

while they cleared out the region of strains of the late worshipers' gods.

As Satsuki finished her nail-trimming, Ryuuko was hoisting the Rending Scissors from where they'd been left jammed into the earth. It annoyed Satsuki to no end to know that Ryuuko's weapon would keep in perfect shape without the slightest bit of care or maintenance… She shook her head. "He shouldn't be in danger. You said the immediate area is clean. Are you having second thoughts?"

"It's still clean," Ryuuko assured her. "The only Life Fibers for miles around are his. That said - I shouldn't be long."

Satsuki stood, blades already clipped to her belt. "I'll search with you."

"I just said…?" Receiving a stern look, Ryuuko shut her mouth and nodded. They set out together.

Ryuuko's senses brought them down into the basement levels, past where Ryuuko had fallen before. Satsuki eyed the perturbed girl as they traversed a relatively tame stretch of solid ground in silence.

-"*Hey… Yoshi-chan?"*

"*Huh? What is it, Ryuuko-san?"-*

The two hybrids had been wandering idly for a bit, at the time she'd heard it; Satsuki had gone looking for them. She still didn't know why, upon finding them chatting by a creek, she had opted not to announce her presence but to test her stealth.

-"*I wanted to ask if… well, if you, sort of… ever have this kinda unexplainable sort of urge to… well, to hurt humans." The last bit, an uncertain, quick mutter.*

"*Wh-what…?"*

"*Sorry - never mind, I shouldn't be saying weird stuff-,"*

"*Do you feel such things?"*

"*It's not like it's anything I can't control… but I can feel it in me. I d-don't like that I can feel it, but sometimes I can."*

"*I've never experienced such a thing… but I* have *only seen one pure human since I became this way."*

"*Right…"*

"*That said, I feel that Miss Kiryuuin has no need to feel threatened by the likes of me."*

"*Huh?"*

"*When the sect learned of the Kiryuuin's role in the Life Fibers' design, that clan was exalted in the faith. Why, would you suppose? Your ancestors were chosen - and thence watched closely, sculpted - as the shepherds meant to build influence in the human world, to prepare it for the Life Fibers' banquet. The ones that became the Kiryuuin were chosen, no doubt, from among the finest ancestral humanity had to offer, and engineered to be successful, to stand above other humans. They alone have a higher purpose to serve for the Creator; to us, that made them an embodiment of power."*

"*And for you," Ryuuko understood, "That means that even if you did feel the impulse, Satsuki's about the* last *human you'd want to lay a hand on."*

"*Exactly." He chuckles. "But the two of you are interesting. You're protective of her, and yet hers is the blade that hangs over the head of any who might do* you *harm."*

"*Hmph. She knows I don't need any of her protecting…"-*

The eavesdropper's eyes had been bitterly downcast, at that.

-"*But… I guess it's natural. She's my sister! That someone stiff-backed like her would do something 'irrational,' just for me… I guess it really means a lot, you know?*"-

Satsuki smiled placidly, as she had then.

"Hey, did you even hear me?"

"Hm?"

"I said, you two should try talking about nerd stuff together. Suits you more than me, anyway."

Satsuki snorted. "When he bores of attempting to speak intellectually with you, maybe I will… "

"What's up with that face?" Ryuuko asked, finally leaning in to scrutinize her soft smile.

The elder sister shook her head, brushing off Ryuuko's curiosity. "Let's find your friend."

"Yoshi-chan? Yoriyoshi!" Ryuuko called excitedly. Now that they were this close, she could tell all the more precisely - he was nearby, probably in the cavern up ahead. She could see dim light - had he lit the old mine's fixtures? They were certainly deep beneath the mountain, where the sunlight would not hope to reach.

"Ryuuko-," Satsuki began, but the younger sister was already running ahead.

"Yoriyo- whoa!"

It was at the mouth of the cavern that she tripped, half-blind at the shift from the deep darkness of the tunnel. Whatever she'd hit was large, but she caught her balance and stumbled past it. "What the…?"

Satsuki was nearing, blinking in the light as she scouted the ground before her. "Be careful, you child-,"

Satsuki froze. Ryuuko's face was hardened, but pale, as her eyes finished adjusting.

She turned from the desiccated corpse she'd tripped over, and saw the dozens - the hundreds more, some huddled together or lying in circles, some with bony, leathery arms clasping books tightly to their drained bodies - that littered the rest of the room. Words of praise had been graffiti'd as if impulsively into every available space on cracked walls: "embrace completion," "glory of the Purpose."

There was not a drop of blood. There had been no struggle here.

No - there was blood in one place. At the cavern's heart, head cradled in his hands, sat one living figure.

"Y-Yoshi!" Ryuuko cried. Why was he in a place like this? There was perhaps one heartbeat of unblinking trepidation, at the distinct, gut-wrenching *wrongness* of the entire scene. Then she was heading toward him at a run. "Oi!"

He was loosely mumbling something. She shook his shoulder.

"Hey! Snap out of-,"

She almost choked. There was blood around him; now it was clear why. The simple dagger he kept on hand was lodged in his gut, and looked as if it had been numerous times over before being left where it now remained.

Ryuuko spoke at a whisper. "Wh-why…?"

"Why?" he echoed blandly. His words were a stream of syllables, dropping out without any rise or fall in pitch. "'Why,' she says. This? I knew it wouldn't kill me. I learned as much when I first woke, after the Harvest…"

"No… !"

"Oh? Ryuuko-san…" He said it without looking up, manner of speaking still eerily disjointed as he seemed to actually register her arrival. He mumbled something indiscernible again.

"What?"

"Well, R-Ryuuko-san… Would you say I'm… here?"

The desolate, wide eyes met her without seeing her. She gasped.

-"*Isn't that fanatical mumbo jumbo you hate so much still controlling you? In the end, what separates you from the ones who were already consumed?"*

"*Hm… Humans will always be terrified of purposelessness. But the ways we rebuke it, our means of self-validation… These vary. If I had to state my own 'creed' simply, I'd say, that is… 'I was here, and I was different.' If my purpose is only defined relative to theirs… I'm alright with that. I live and will die cursing the Life Fibers they so adored."*

"*So it's just… a difference of faith?"*

A nod. "That's all this soul needs."-

"You're here, Yoshi-chan!"

Ryuuko wasn't sure why she shouted quite so loudly. She grabbed his bloodied hand.

"You, and me, and Sis! We're all here-!"

"*Where is the cluster?* "

That voice was Satsuki's, sharp.

"Sis…?" Ryuuko said, seeing the woman's hand on a sword hilt.

"The 'faithful' sprawled here chose an ideal location for the Life Fibers that came for them to set up a nest. Life Fiber systems that have just gorged themselves form nests to process the new energy, evolve, and reconfigure themselves to maximal efficiency before migrating on…"

Yoriyoshi was mumbling again, inattentive. "The purpose…"

Satsuki shouted over him, fierce. "Yet Ryuuko detected nothing in this region when we first arrived - well too soon after the 'harvest' slaughter for the Life Fibers to have vacated this region! Even the cluster that wandered into the vicinity yesterday was much too weak to have been the same one that absorbed this many humans! Speak, Shin'yuu! *What is going on here?!* "

"Calm down, sis-! Ouch!" Ryuuko hissed, as Yoshi's hand locked tightly on her own.

"A purpose…?" he drawled idly, voice high. "You're terrified, too. The two of you… what purpose *is* there for you…"

Ryuuko scowled as her hand popped unpleasantly. Satsuki's aura flared up threateningly with cold brilliance - to no apparent effect.

"… in irrationally wandering about, and fighting this way?"

It was then that Satsuki launched herself toward him with a yell.

Ryuuko knew he would be petrified, powerless before the insane force of spiritual pressure Satsuki was exuding. She was about to move to shield him - was still of the mind that she needed to protect Yoriyoshi from harm, before Satsuki did something irreparable - when the boy rose sharply-

Rotated Ryuuko's arm-

And flipped her head over heels, smack into the ground.

All the better, Satsuki thought, calculating, that she had a cleaner shot at her target.

"Heh?" Ryuuko grunted in bafflement as the back of her neck struck down, and in her inverted view Yoriyoshi was turning his deadened gaze toward the immense threat entailed in the descending Satsuki.

A number of things occurred in the following moment.

CRACK!

Satsuki was launched backwards into the air.

Yoriyoshi vanished to Ryuuko's eyes.

Then, if time were to be slowed by a factor of some ten times, one might have observed in still rapid succession a string of a dozen or so rushing blows that tossed the Kiryuuin's form about within a small area midair, each strike rattling out with a concussive boom of force. But as it was, the sound that issued from the assault was blended into a single *CRACK!* of ludicrous volume, of speed and force, as a figure materialized with a kick that sent the suddenly battered Kiryuuin in a straight shot into the wall.

She yowled, breathless, senseless, and wide-eyed, as stone crackled violently outward from behind her back.

A shockwave from the kick caught her as she began to bounce forward, pinning her flat against a compressing wall of shattered stone.

The wall exploded again, now beginning to topple around her.

Meanwhile Ryuuko bounced from her neck landing, flopping to the dirt.

And the Bakuzan Gako skittered across the floor, while the Bakuzan Kouryuu lodged itself in a random corpse.

Gravity was finishing its work on the wall when Yoriyoshi tumbled to land lightly on his feet, gasping. Ryuuko's thought process worked simply, as it was disposed to when Satsuki suffered harm.

"*Nee-san!* " she screeched, landing in a crouch and flinging herself toward her. Her single leap certainly contained enough force to carry her past Yoriyoshi, and the rest of the twenty meters to Satsuki.

She'd traveled about one meter when Yoshi's hand snapped out at his side, into her path.

The backfist crushed her nose and popped both ears as force rippled through her skull. A spray of blood was scattering her wake as Ryuuko's head slammed back into a sudden spiderweb pattern of broken earth at Yoshi's side, her legs sprawling above her before dropping flat.

A heel, dropping toward her. She rolled aside as the kick ruptured more exploding stone, and she hopped back from the shockwave, sliding back in a crouch with one hand grazing the ground. Her teeth gritted as she lifted her head, glaring back in confusion at the boy while blood dripped from her chin. "Wh-what the hell?!"

Yoriyoshi's hand extended, and for one moment, he seemed to truly see her.

"I-I'm sorr-,"

His eyes went blank. His hand punched into his gut with a foul crunch, clear through the wound-riddled flesh, and yanked out a hunk of something dark and veined with glowing lines of crimson, attached to his body by fibrous strings. The isolated core pulsed once in his hand before his fingers spasmed shut, bursting it. Pressurized energy scattered like liquid light before collapsing inward, rushing into his form.

"Th-their lives…" Satsuki struggled to lift her head an inch, her body mostly buried in rubble. Her lips twitched, her voice hoarse as she

pushed one hand free. "The energy stolen here… They hid it in…?"

Yoriyoshi hung his head; though his voice and body stilled, winds thrashed away from him, burning, speckling the air with stinging dirt and debris. His voice was low and steady in the shaking room.

"*If God should only withdraw His Hand from the Floodgate, it would immediately fly open, and the fiery Floods would rush forth with inconceivable Fury; and if your Strength were ten thousand Times greater than the Strength of the stoutest, sturdiest Devil in Hell, it would be* ***nothing*** *to withstand or endure it."*

He lifted one hand, speaking slowly as fingertips burst suddenly into grotesque claws.

"*The Wrath of God burns against the Wicked…"*

Ryuuko beheld the scene in horror, bile building in her throat.

"… *Their Damnation don't slumber…"*

His teeth lengthened, sharpening to jagged points. His visible skin took the color of dusty charcoal.

"… *The Pit is prepared, the Fire is made ready…"*

The ground rumbled in the shadow of his razorlike voice.

"… *the Furnace is now hot, ready to receive them…"*

Crimson spikes jutted forward above his knees; a sleek blade, like a scythe, lurched back from his elbow.

"… *the Flames do now rage and glow."*

Fibers that sizzled brightly with energy poured from the bleeding hole in his gut, stretching to envelop his torso and limbs in a wiry, writhing cloak.

"*The glittering Sword is whet, and held over them, and the Pit hath opened her Mouth under them."*

The twisting threads knitted, merging and solidifying upon him to leave a smooth coat of cloth armor sewn tight to his form - which swelled suddenly with sleek muscle beneath it. His fists snapped shut as he lifted his head, opening eyes set blankly against ghoulish black and vibrating strings of electrical red. He smiled, furious and deranged. No - whatever will had consumed his twisted his mouth up into a mockery of a jagged, toothy grin.

"*They have **no** Refuge, **nothing** to take hold of. All that preserved them every moment was the meer **arbitrary** Will, and uncovenanted **unobliged** Forbearance, of an **incensed** GOD."*

Glasses lenses warped and shattered as the room shook with nameless pressure, a throb that carried itself on the note of bitter, harsh finality in his tone.

Satsuki scowled. "Shin'yuu Yoriyoshi… Y-you…"

The tension in her slackened where she lay, and her head dropped as unfocused blue eyes fell shut.

Ryuuko's parted lips sealed. Her shock hardened into a glower as she drilled what had been Yoriyoshi with her gaze, and drew a glinting red pair of scissors from her belt.

-Wrath-

[img: http://orig01.deviantart.net/8492/f/2016/011/b/f/life_fiber_override__fusion__ateod_ch8__by_hinata0321-d9nlbel.png]

End

Next up, Sh!t Gets Real at the End of Days.

…*Not really*

Evolution at the End of Days

Chapter 9: Evolution at the End of Days

Break the game. Break the rules.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

AT THE END OF DAYS

Nine \ Evolution - - At the End of Days

CLANG!

His speed was terrifying.

Ryuuko had parried the slash of claws with the now fully-sized scissor blade in her left hand, while the separate blade seized in her right swung to attack. He blocked with the narrow scythe protruding from his elbow.

The young woman snarled as they remained locked, trying to hide her fear as he glowered back through glasses lenses that had cracked under his own aura. "So the Life Fibers think they're hot shit now, huh? I don't know about their omnipotence; what I *do* know is that I've been cutting down their like for *years!* "

She shoved and swung, but faltered unexpectedly in the move. The strike went shallowly across Yoriyoshi's front; flesh, and the Life Fiber suit bonded tightly to it, mended themselves inches behind the passing of the blade.

He raised a brow, and spun to glance her blocking blades with the scythe, sending her skidding back as earth crackled beneath her feet. A second blade lanced from his other elbow, and he rushed nearer in a pair of powerful strides. Before she could guard he was sliding past, and her side had been hacked open.

"Damn it," Ryuuko grunted, swinging as the menace dashed again. He spun beneath the lateral strike, and engaged her up close as she struggled to fend off a blurring string of attacks. "What've you even done with Yoriyoshi?!"

"*Huh?!* " In a fluid move he dodged and swept a kick through her ankles. Falling forward, she'd only begun to swear before he bludgeoned a kick up against her midriff; her body hit the ceiling, smacked flat into the ground, and bounced a good few meters up again before she lurched to a halt on her side, wheezing.

"*Shin'yuu Yoriyoshi is right here*," he said, a clawed hand on his chest. "*Life Fiber Override: Fusion. Not a mere Humanform Battery, but a Humanform Weapon. This body's compatibility is extraordinary; it is serving quite nicely as an instrument to concentrate this wealth of energy…* "

"B-bastard… That's his family and *friends-!* "

He was *fast* . Ryuuko had no sooner begun to lunge at his figure a good few strides away, and drawn back to strike, than a hand locked onto her arm and a spiked knee smashed into her unguarded stomach. She bent and hacked, one eye shut, blood streaking from her lips in the shocked moment before an impact between her shoulders laid her flat with a crash.

Th-the Scissor blades - I dropped them…? Shoot! She turned her head, keeping an eye on the Fusion as she fought to rise.

"*If it's any condolence,"* he said, *"you could not have altered this human's fate. His own will, though it first resisted desperately, has been ours to control since the time he spent teetering on the brink of*

starvation. We let his 'self' emerge, and interact freely with you, merely to examine you." He shook his head. *"The Kiryuuin traitor's intuition was accurate; when a Life Fiber-infused human's basic needs go unmet, his will dwindles as he is forced to rely on-,"*

"'Traitor'?" Ryuuko scoffed, rising to a crouch. "You mean Satsuki? I'd call that a *compliment*, for an heir to the Kiryuuin legacy-!"

WHAM!

That was her jaw, being shattered by a kick.

She glanced off the wall and lay stunned where she fell, choking on a scream.

"*When homo sapiens had grown adequately sophisticated, and the band destined to become the Kiryuuin Clan was shown the truth, it submitted wholeheartedly to the inevitability of Life Fiber dominance. And it became the first, silent priesthood of all those who would call for embracing humanity's Purpose. They traded their own species for the continued power and favor of what* you *would call its oppressor. Now, on that sin of betrayal, the sole creator and oppressor looks to collect. Yet you seek to defy your creator? You still think to deny us our harvest of humankind?"*

"Of c-course I do!" she said. "Who wouldn't?! If I can fight my idiot ancestors' mistakes, why *wouldn't* I try?!"

"*Mistakes?"* he hissed, eyes narrowing. *"… Tell me this, Matoi Ryuuko. Of what worth are cattle, turned loose from the farm? What would their freedom be to you, but the meandering of dumb beasts with laughably diminished powers of survival - a waste in every way? Wasted resources, wasted effort, wasted life. Wasted potential to fill human plates."*

"Ain't you a chatterbox?" Ryuuko winced as her mending jaw crunched fully back into place. Shakily, she rose. "So? The hell's that got to do with us?!"

She lunged, but the Fusion vanished in a blur of speed. *Bastard's always one step ahead!*

"*Well, for example,"* said a voice at her back, *"why would you suppose that I am able to punch you-,"*

She whirled, only to receive a fist that sent her so swiftly across the room that the ground, more than a foot beneath her, tore and threw itself violently outward in her wake. She met the wall with a wail, over the crack of her own bursting ribs, and crumpled to her knees as a good length of the wall came down.

"*-with so many times more strength than this human's muscles could ever have mustered? If I summed his independent strength with that of all the humans whose energies were harvested here, as well as the energy that would be contained in the boy's own weight in raw Life Fibers - a gross overestimation of the amount lacing this body - even such a great deal of energy would not be enough, or focused enough, to send you flying as I just did. But the whole is greater than the sum of the parts."*

Ryuuko stood, murder in her eyes. Her bones were mending themselves faster than they had been able to in quite some time, but endurance would not win her the battle; even that would not last forever. *If I h-had… Senketsu… !*

"*Humans bred their livestock and crops to grow large, and rich in the nutrients humans require - their efforts clumsily but surely optimizing their food sources to meet the demands of the human populace. So it is that, in ways humans alone cannot understand or use, the human form is a reflection of the Life Fibers' needs. Humans exist for our utilization!"*

"That can't…"

"*Your Kiryuuin woman grew quite formidable through training, as many before her, but ultimately she is merely human. And humans cannot manifest their own great, dormant powers as effectively as*

we. Left alone, they squander and waste their energy, energy that WE can make infinitely more valuable and precious! Do you fail to see the logic of this, Matoi Ryuuko?!"

"Logic doesn't mean jack shit sometimes!" she spat, flinging back her arms.

Threads glinted subtly in the air, and at her fingertips - and two scissor blades went careening toward the Fusion's back.

He quirked a scornful brow as the blades' trajectories crossed behind his back; they passed each other, sailing forward and down points-first at his sides. The blades were missing him.

He straightened in surprise as the looped scissor handles hooked his long elbow spikes before the blades planted themselves in the earth. And he was immobilized as Ryuuko, leaping with the pull of retracting threads between her hands and the handles of the fixed blades, closed rapidly to plow both feet into his face.

She felt a sick twinge, briefly, as his neck snapped. Monstrous or not, his form was still like a human's.

And Ryuuko welcomed the sick feeling, for fear of the part of her that would far too readily relish in the sound of human bones breaking under her power. However strong any logic at play in the background, she knew what she felt. That parasitic malice, that would have her slaughter her own, was not a thing to be indulged.

She landed on her feet before a body that began to slump - and his head righted itself with a shudder, a squelch. Ryuuko was ready to tear on the attack when he retracted the elbow blades, freeing himself, and leapt a good distance away.

Not even pausing in her motion, Ryuuko drew the Scissors from the earth, spinning once as she leapt forward to swing one blade, then the other, through the air with a roar.

Energy cracked and sparked through the sundered, distorting air, shooting toward the Fusion like an explosive wave.

He crossed his arms in defense. His feet were driven back one short meter, heels digging sharply into crunching stone - and the wall a ways behind him was denting back in a massive cross pattern the moment before a whole length of it was blown out, like a tire rupturing with absurd pressure.

Ryuuko panted, blades still outstretched in her hands as the wind settled, and the Fusion lowered his defending arms. The room was filled with a rumble as bits of the ceiling crumbled and dropped.

The monster made Yoriyoshi's face frown. *"Of course, you are inherently capable of tapping into more of your body's latent power than can a natural human. Yet even the blessing of your symbiosis is wasted. The potential you'd begun to awaken now withers in constraint."*

"What are you saying?"

"*You constrain* yourself*, as if to make your broken life with that woman as humanlike as possible. It's unsightly. You feel a human's pain and suffer wounds, as if only to let her bandage and tend you. You respond meekly when she berates you for letting your powers evolve. All this* ***worthless*** *sentimentality, to keep your worlds from drifting irreparably far apart…"*

"So what if I want to live with Satsuki? What's it to you, anyways?! I want to live as a human, and protect humans, and that's the reason I can keep fighting! So my humanity is not weakness!"

"*Is it not?"*

His form blurred. She began to recoil, anticipating an uppercut, but only found his fist abruptly resting at the space beneath her breastbone, with no more impact than a tap.

Splikt.

Her lips twitched. A bewildered sound, almost taking the form of a laugh, grated shortly, wetly, from her throat.

Then true pain pierced her in the moment blood began to spray from about a scarlet-black blade protruding far from her upper back, having projected from his fist to neatly skewer her heart.

She sputtered dumbly, spasming eyes stretched wide. He retracted the dripping blade, and withdrew his hand. Blood erupted in a pair of bursts from her pierced front and back before more was thrown from her lips, and she slumped to her knees, then flat to the dirt.

And she knew that if she were human, she would already be quite dead.

"*Well? How* is *the pain of surviving your heart being destroyed?"*

D-damn… it… Her fingers twitched.

"*Perhaps you think now - 'if only I had my kamui.' But you need not even rely on such tools. If you were not so unfortunately 'human,' you could brush off this much damage easily."*

"Y-yeah?" she croaked through a gurgle of blood. "I've only kn-known one other Life Fiber-infused human wh-who used her Life Fibers freely… She was a fucking monster, too. Th-that's why… I can't… I'll n-*never*… urk!"

He frowned as she coughed and hacked. *"You, whilst groveling in the dirt, would mock a perfect Kiryuuin, after praising a defect. Yet look at yourself: too human to heal, yet unable to die. No matter how human you try to be, your Life Fibers will do this much for you - and still you spurn them. Yours is a pitiful, backwards state.* Never *mistake yourself for a human being, Matoi Ryuuko. You have made yourself the only creature in this world capable of suffering the pain you're now in, in its entirety. This tragic byproduct of empathy is not*

*evolution; it makes a joke of it. Unawakened, you are merely an **abomination**."*

He had grasped a handful of her hair, lifting her strengthless form from the ground. He studied her with an appraising glare, her shut eyes, her gushing wound, her bruises and breaks, so sluggish to heal. *"You creatures are illogical. Such sentiments simply cannot be protected… with a form forced to rely on something as fragile as a heart pumping blood."*

He dropped her, and a blade from his free hand projected to stab her again. Two dozen more calmly wicked strikes to her torso, in the space of a moment, before he let her fall with a heavy, splattering thud. For a moment, she was still. All that stirred was a rapid patter of thoughts, like raindrops, on her scattered mind.

My heart. It's nothing. It doesn't exist right now.

So I'd be flatlining. For good.

Then I'm 'dead'? No, not dead.

But my guts are in tatters. My blood ain't where it should be.

This much of it shouldn't be on the ground.

What, then? This state. What is it?

Alive? Dead? Undefined?

Her body shuddered.

What am I? R-right now …

Something that doesn't die like a human.

Can I be human, if …

If in human terms, I can't be defined …?

A low voice, dripping with disdain.

"*Even your Life Fibers might not preserve you much longer this way, repressed as they are. Foolish… You, of Kiryuuin blood - if you could only bring yourself to submit to your Life Fibers, you would overwhelm this boy easily…"*

Ryuuko shivered again where she lay, cold fingers scraping through the dirt as she suddenly convulsed. Her teeth clenched. The Fibers were there - they wanted to wear her, and save her. Make her better than she was. Make her *more* . She had no power to do anything anymore…

"*Instead, you let that fine blood simply spill away. But the Kiryuuin, with their distinct evolutionary advantage…"*

Before he finished the thought, something behind him registered in Ryuuko's dazed, wild eyes.

One bloodied Kiryuuin, leaping silently at his back, both obsidian blades in hand.

The sounds of two collisions rang in quick succession: his hand with Satsuki's face, and the back of Satsuki's head with the wall that had been fifteen meters from her back, making the cavern roar at the punishment. He pressed her head against the radially cracked wall while her feet dangled, but this wall did not collapse out to other tunnels or rooms; it was solid stone.

Satsuki's arms had been splayed wide, flat to the wall, at the moment of impact; now they dropped with slumping shoulders, as her head remained pinned by the Fusion's hand on her face.

"*A decent attempt,"* he growled, pushing until Satsuki tensed again, her fingertips spasming, and a choked sound of pain escaped her. *"For a human."*

"No!" Ryuuko croaked. She flailed in a sudden, mad endeavor to stand, to even move, but her limbs were leaden, and her torso a mess of pain. Her fingers dug down numbly, fighting desperately to drag her forward as sweat burned in her eyes.

"*A human is still a human,"* he crooned, cold, *"Kiryuuin or not. And if* this *one were not holding you back, then perhaps…"*

More stone cracked as he sharply redoubled his force, and Satsuki's visible eye widened.

"Stop!" Ryuuko pleaded, utterly helpless. Her heart, in attempting to race, only sent still more pain coursing through her chest. "Stop it!"

"*If you are **by your own choice** unable to protect her, why should I?"* he boomed in condescension. *"This world has a system - a system all things are subject to. A system you cannot overturn, cannot even contest. You live. You march in your place. And for the master, you **die**. You. Are. ANTS!"*

Satsuki wailed as he punctuated his words with a shove that further lengthened the cracks on the wall.

"*Well? If you can only lie there in powerlessness, shall I crush this errant creature's skull?"*

"Stop!" Ryuuko choked again, half-mad in panic and her own pain. "If you wanna kill someone, kill ME! Kill me, kill me, kill *me-!* "

Satsuki's scream burst free, an earsplitting shriek of pain that rang aloud, long and terrible. It was the sound of a person in dire peril, a being pushed to within one inch of certain death.

And it made something

in Ryuuko

snap.

"*STOP IIIIIIIITTTTTT!* "

The cry was bestial, deafening, as Ryuuko's outstretched hand unraveled from the fingertips, into a web of threads that splayed rapidly forward, and wound about the Fusion's torso and neck with a snap of speed.

He grunted as the binding constricted, and he lurched backwards under a tremendous force - yanked cleanly off his feet, away from the wall, away from Satsuki - and sailing on a course for a Ryuuko who was flying toward him from a leap, like a humanoid missile guided by taut, retracting fibers.

Her eyes were vehement, her face masked in shadow, as a curved Life Fiber blade jutted sharply from near her elbow toward her wrist, resting above her forearm and locking in place with a sickening crunch as she drew and poised the arm before herself.

[img: http://orig10.deviantart.net/a550/f/2016/009/a/8/kikendanzetsucolor1_by_hinata0321-d9nerz6.png]

HISSATSU

( )

[FINISHING MOVE]

The bloody blade's violently glowing edge impacted the Fusion's back with a momentous crunch.

"***KIKEN DANZETSU****!* "

(

[HAZARD BREAKER]

And the Fusion was hewn in two, the pieces glanced aside, as Ryuuko burst through with a savage outward thrust of her bladed arm.

[img: http://orig12.deviantart.net/0bb5/f/2016/009/6/a/kikendanzetsucolorcrop_by_hinata0321-d9nes7e.png]

Her momentum carried her forward well beyond the decisive strike, so she landed on her feet and slowed herself before stumbling into a light collision with Satsuki. She caught her older sister's toppling form, her leaning weight pinning her again to the wall, though neither of them would have remained upright without support.

"R-Ryuuko," Satsuki rasped.

The younger woman's face was buried in her shoulder as Ryuuko's hand rose. She looked up, shaking steadily as she found Satsuki's eyes. Shivering fingers neared the older sister's bruised face. "N-Nee-san…"

A shudder within. Ryuuko's teeth snapped shut in a grimace as a pained sound caught in her throat, and tired eyes grew sharp, intensely unfocused, as her hand fell to latch onto Satsuki's shoulder. She turned her head away, roughly vomiting blood; crimson drizzled from her wounds.

"Ryuuko!"

"*She's taken too much damage already,"* a gloating voice explained. Satsuki lifted her head with a dangerous look as Ryuuko writhed against her. The bloody halves of the Fusion, sprawled on the cavern floor, were joined by a slender thread; he pulled himself together on the ground, and stitching leapt to span the space between his halves before a last pull righted them with a squelch. Blood gurgled from his lips as he rose with a deranged grin. *"Her own power's run dry. But*

she knows she must fight. As a human, she cannot lie unmoving forever; to remain in flux in this world is her driving impulse. Yet as a monster, she has forgotten how to submit. To survive, she must fight. To fight, she can only Awaken. And in the eyes of Life Fiber instinct, how much will she care for her dear, pitiful Onee-san when she does?"

"Tch!" Satsuki grasped her sister's arms, but the hand on her shoulder didn't budge. "Ryuuko! Listen to me!"

"*GYAAAAAH!"* Ryuuko howled, in pain or fury, eyes white as she thrashed her head. She was fighting; it was all she knew how to do.

But crimson veins were rising, spreading, crackling with energy over her paling skin. Their crawling advance surged, and was halted just before reaching her upturned face, as she croaked in effort.

Ryuuko couldn't think; she couldn't breathe past the suffocating force.

Fight. Fight. Fight fight fight fight FIGHT… !

There was a human - the Kiryuuin - her *sister* - Satsuki - right in front of her. She couldn't lose control; she didn't know what would happen if she did.

But everything hurt. It *hurt.*

And she felt the weight of her constraint. She thought she'd gotten used to it, accepted it. Even forgotten about it. But now it was so heavy.

But, Satsuki.

The human.

Clashing impulses of primality - human and Life Fiber - were all that remained of her for one moment, cresting and rolling and crashing

through her soul. They warred, pounding through her with the useless beating of her shredded heart.

Protect.

Destroy.

Protect.

Destroy.

Protec-

Ryuuko met Satsuki's eyes blankly, and began to push away from her.

The veins patterned her face, and she froze, standing straight, an iron grip still pinning Satsuki's shoulder to the wall.

Adapt.

"*Sis… Sorry."*

Satsuki's look of confusion, of bated breath, turned to shock as Ryuuko's whitened eyes snapped to a searing red.

Then the hand on Satsuki's shoulder took the texture of thread, and those threads pierced her.

They drew on her blood, in the way a kamui might. They also drew her *energy* - the thing Kiryuuin honed in themselves, to wield as enhanced strength or exude as overpowering charisma - an intangible power most humans lived out their lives unaware of and unable to touch. Ryuuko was tapping into the power of her spirit itself.

Satsuki's face paled.

"R-Ryuuko… stop… s-*stop*… !"

But these tense pleas went ignored. Her voice faded along with the initial flash of terror, and a wash of mind-numbing sensation overtook her; her resistance gave out, as if succumbing to a programmed shutdown. A tear rolled down her cheek, from an unblinking eye. She could only submit.

That was more terrifying than anything.

Ryuuko's head tilted slightly back, in a sublime, mesmerized calm. Her hair stirred weightlessly, rising in a light wind as it grew brightly streaked with blue. She gave a breath, and detached her hand from Satsuki's shoulder. The long-haired woman's face remained taut even as her eyelids drooped; she slid down along the wall until she sat, and her head hung, but her breath remained fitful through parted lips.

Ryuuko flexed a red-patterned hand before her as her wounds began to steam, and knitted, threadlike, before melding again into smooth flesh. Then her head turned to abruptly drill an imperious glare dead into the eyes of the one who observed her.

He flinched. *"You… That's not possible!"* the Fusion snarled, denting the earth as he leaped toward her with terrific speed.

WHAM!

His skull compacted, his neck twisting under the weight of Ryuuko's backhand across his face. He went corkscrewing at an angle into the quailing cavern roof, glancing off toward the ground again; his broken body convulsively untwisted itself as it fell, and he landed heavily on his feet, back hunched.

"*You're still a FOOL!"* he spat. *"You engage aimlessly in petty battles on a handful of islands off the eastern coast of the Eurasian continent. WE engineered entire worlds to function to our advantage! We have done so for thousands of your world's millennia, and will continue for thousands more! Our existence is eternal! You are finite and small! To us, you are NOTHING-!"*

"*GRAAAAAAAAAAAAH!*"

Ryuuko's tyrannical roar as she faced him, as electrically intense blue-on-red eyes swept around toward him, bade everything in her line of sight to explode backward from a blast of force. The Fusion was buffeted, blown back onto one foot. The remaining walls and ceiling, for a large radius behind him, compacted, stone shrinking back impossibly.

Then the cavern, and everything beyond in the direction Ryuuko faced, was blasted out. Tons upon tons of shattered, vaporizing stone went hurtling away, scattering off into open air - into the blazing sunlight that filtered into the hole in the cliff.

The Fusion winced, enhanced human eyes dazzled. Those two had unlocked something formidable; this should not have happened this way. He needed to escape.

With this in mind, he blinked in astonishment as he found a scissor blade piercing his gut, exiting his back. He and Ryuuko, who'd stabbed him, were drifting through space together, amid newly falling debris.

"*Th-the power of the Kiryuuin… and the Life Fibers… together, th-they'll…*"

The other scissor gleamed, flickering brightly in the sunlight as it neared. It plunged beside its companion into his splitting flesh, before Ryuuko wrenched both blades outward in a shower of blood.

"The m-moment I… first saw you… every L-Life Fiber in my body shuddered, in fear. That's how I knew… something good would come of s-sticking with you, Ryuuko-san…"

Her face was bleak as the bloodsoaked figure on the ground wheezed. His appearance was reverting, even if stray, torn Life Fibers twitched frantically, ineffectually about his wounds.

"Yoshi-chan…" Ryuuko whispered, as tears ran quietly from his cracked eyes. "Your own, human life force… the last bit of what makes ya' human… it was still down there, the whole time? Still fighting, when you said you wouldn't…"

"There was a l-lot to fight through, to t-*talk* to you again*…* Hehe… All along, I was w-willing to die with these p-parasites, if I had to… but I'm glad… the time I spent with you…"

His face twisted in pain as Life Fibers stretched away from his body; his skin began to shrivel and pale where they left. "These i-infernal threads… th-they're eating me, Ryuuko-san! I-I'm… *disgusting* !"

Ryuuko's teeth ground as he laughed unevenly, wept with a broken smile, bitterly triumphant. *Discarding him, and absorbing what's left of him… now that he's no use to you?*

"I'm s-so glad… th-that this body failed the p-purpose chosen for i-it… !"

Rocks were falling periodically; the overhanging cliff left towering above was gradually beginning to crumble.

But do you plan to make him suffer until you've gorged yourself on everything he was?!

Ryuuko's hand extended. She fought to show him a tender face. "Yoriyoshi… you're fine now."

The Life Fibers shot from her reddening fingertips under her command, piercing his body in five narrow beams of living, red-black thread.

He looked on with amazement in his cloudy eyes as the Life Fibers that had been escaping him stilled and began to blacken and grow brittle, weak.

"What's left of you… those bastards ain't getting it," Ryuuko seethed. But she could not kill the Life Fibers alone; draining the power that sustained them necessitated stealing the condensed power of all those who had died here - and Yoriyoshi's own life energy, still bound so loosely to his flesh. So she found the flow of it all, and pulled it.

She gasped. *You and Dad had it wrong, Mikisugi. It's not just electricity they feed on… it's life.*

Sh-sheer … life? That's …

I see it now… There's… something tender here, that I can feel… It's flowing in…

Her breath shook past her watery smile. *I get it now. I know, as long as this is here… We're human! We're both human.*

I'm … so glad …

The pain had left Yoriyoshi's face. His consciousness was departing. "N-now you're consuming me, Ryuuko-san…" He smiled calmly, content in his musing. "If you c-can use me, does this make you my true god, and this my purpose…?"

Through his scholarly air, Ryuuko saw the hope shining so brightly in his eyes. "… If you like it better that way… I'd say so."

"Ah… then, how does my l-life taste, Ryuuko-sama?"

Water fell from her chin as she gave a cocky smile. "You taste like shit. I can feel every drop of your bitterness and hate coursing like poison into my veins, and as your god, it appalls and sickens me."

His eyes shut with a chuckle. His voice was soft. "*Yokatta…* This is a m-much better way to go… as a sacrifice to you, goddess who strikes fear in our Oppressor… May my hatred sustain you on your path of carnage. May my b-bitterness become as the weapon you bare in contempt for fate's design…"

"Tch… Stop screwin' with me, Shin'yuu."

"Hmph…"

He looked up at her with blurring sight, at the destroyed cavern and the cliff angled out into the glowing clouds and sun behind her. The last of his power, and the power that had been stored away in him, was trickling into her fingers.

"Shin'yuu Yoriyoshi… were you here?" she asked softly, her voice distant to his ears. But she knew he heard it. "Were you different?"

"I-I was… here… I was… different. I… had a *purpose*…"

The hoarse words were passed through lips upturned at the corners. When they had gone, his chest did not rise again.

Ryuuko's teeth clenched, and she turned. *I'll stay alive…*

We'll both *stay alive… for sure!*

The ground was rumbling as she took off running; she leapt a large rock that tumbled across her path.

"Satsuki!" she cried. Though Satsuki had been watching her from where she sat, she remained somewhat dazed. When Ryuuko came to her side, and reached toward her, Satsuki flinched away.

Ryuuko felt a pang. Face flushed, she averted her gaze from the look in Satsuki's eyes.

"I'm sorry," Ryuuko said. "But this whole place is about to come down. We need to be gone before it does."

"I know that," Satsuki said, standing shakily on her own strength before Ryuuko cautioned to look at her again. Hard-eyed, chin high, Satsuki nodded.

Ryuuko scooped her quickly but gently into her arms, and leapt across what had been the cavern and the tunnels beyond. She was barreling straight for what looked like the edge of the Earth when a roar shook the world, and an enormous chunk of the overhanging cliff gave out, followed by more.

"It's a rockslide!" Satsuki shouted over the noise of falling, breaking stone. She turned her head forward again, fierce eyes calculating. "How long is the drop?"

"No clue!" Ryuuko answered.

"What?!"

"I won't die! Just trust me on it!"

Sailing momentarily after shoving off a bump in the ground, Ryuuko looked back. A tsunami of dust and stone was surging on in thunderous pursuit.

It swallowed up a fresh corpse.

Turning forward, Ryuuko took three more steps and leapt onto a slope.

"Hang on!"

Her feet skidded down, tearing through forty meters of sparse grass and coarse soil. Then she leapt forward, still shy of the edge, so that by the time they sailed over it they were dropping almost straight down.

Above their heads, waves of stone and dust were jettisoned out over the edge, beginning to blanket the sky in debris.

Their eyes stayed downward, on the first of their concerns.

Ryuuko was right: the landing didn't kill her.

She screamed. With masterful timing, momentum safely (enough) expended, Satsuki slipped from Ryuuko's weakening arms, grabbed her fainting sister, and lunged with her to the ground at the cliff wall.

A moment later, a torrential sum of stone began crashing into a lake a good way before them. Soon there was more; trees, pieces of buildings and their contents. Church benches. Though a few stray rocks fell closer, and the air grew thick with dust and mist, they were safe here.

Satsuki sighed, pulling away the arm that had cradled Ryuuko's head, and turning from her instinctive position of lying protectively over the girl. Safe*…* She willed tensely locked teeth to unclench. Leaning back against the wall, she stared lethargically at the endless rain of earth and debris and felt her heart rate gradually begin to normalize. She looked to Ryuuko beside her, who lay sprawled and motionless with nothing but whites to her eyes.

We're a mess… Satsuki thought, crawling over to start straightening broken legs.

But thanks to you…

It looks like we're alive.

In a minute Ryuuko twitched; her blank eyes shut, and she coughed on the dust, and she loosed a high-pitched whimper of pain. When she opened her eyes, they were clear. "Satsuki…?"

"I'm here," she answered the groan. "You busted both of your ankles and both your knees, but you pulled it off."

"Worth," Ryuuko said with a cringe, gingerly sitting up. She looked her sister up and down. "You alright? Was the landing too sharp?"

Satsuki's eyes flashed. "I'm *fine* . I'm not so fragile simply because I'm…"

Ryuuko looked down as she trailed off. "S-Satsuki… I'm sorry."

"For what? It's not your fault the power I worked for is so much more effective in *your* hands than it is in mine, but you saved us-,"

"I made you f-feel vulnerable!" Ryuuko blurted out, "I'm sorry-!"

Satsuki slapped her, leveling her onto her back again.

"I was *not* vulnerable!" she hissed.

"Okay!" Ryuuko gasped through the pain, trying not to focus on her jarred legs. Now wasn't the time to point out that the violent reaction, the renewed aversion to acknowledging weakness, told her exactly how shaken the long-haired woman was. "You weren't. It's alright now, sis."

Satsuki's anger deflated; she knew it was sorely misdirected. She shook her head. Why was she being comforted by the one who had just suffered so intensely - who was in a pitiful state herself? "… I'm sorry," she said, sober. "About your frien- about Shin'yuu-san, as well."

Ryuuko's expression fell. "I-I've… killed a human now, huh? Not a cluster core - a 'Humanform Battery' - either. In the end, he was a thinking, breathing human again. I wouldn't have batted an eye at killing Ragyou, and I helped you kill 'er, but n-now I've killed a *good* human… !"

Satsuki frowned, but her eyes offered a rare bit of tenderness. "And what would he think, if he saw you regretting that now?"

"Huh?"

"He died with his god standing right in front of him, in flesh and blood - his own god, crying and snotting and despairing just for him." She stroked Ryuuko's cheek, brushing a tear streak away. Ryuuko was listening attentively, looking up at her - this absurdly powerful

creature, that had blown a hole in the mountainside and sent half of the village above piling itself into a heap in the lake in front of them - so battered and broken up inside that she was hanging on her sister's words. Satsuki swallowed at a knot in her throat. "And while the part of you that's nonhuman is what allowed you to take him… I would think it's the human part - the beautiful heart you usually try to keep tucked away - that made it a not-so-bad way to go…"

She shushed as the line of Ryuuko's lips wrinkled. Long fingers pushed the red lock of hair out of her face. She hesitated a moment, meeting the watery eyes that shut above the strained grit to Ryuuko's teeth; then she leaned down, pressing her lips to Ryuuko's brow until she felt the furrow of it go smooth. Eyes shut, she lowered her head, resting her forehead against Ryuuko's for a quiet moment.

"Be worthy of his faith. We'll keep fighting; we'll find a purpose." Her eyes opened, finding Ryuuko to be looking tranquilly up at her. "You'll keep fighting, won't you, Ryuuko? And as long as you are, I will fight alongside you. You know that."

"Fighting… but what can we really do, in the end? The Life Fibers… they're strong. He said it while he was a monster…"

"We *can* do something, Ryuuko," Satsuki insisted, urgent. "With our power together, we have to be able to do *something!* "

Ryuuko blinked at the confidence in her tone; she saw the wheels turning in sharp blue eyes. "What're you thinking?"

"They created a Humanform Weapon to observe and attack us. They tried to sway you, but were fearful when you used my power…"

"Yoriyoshi said it - his Life Fibers were scared when he first met me!"

"And the Kiryuuin have some evolutionary advantage. These are the things we know. We might not know what exactly that advantage is, or what the Life Fibers want from you, but we do know that they also consider us dangerous! Do you see it? If they're adapting specifically

to stop us, and turning weapons against us, we must pose a threat to them!"

"And that threat… is probably hidden in something they want to keep us from learning, at all costs. But it's there…" She brightened, hesitantly. "So you're saying we *are* doing something? Not just hacking up Life Fibers while we watch the days go by?"

Satsuki nodded grimly, baring her teeth in a stern smile. "Yes - We are not ants! We do not march to their tune, or exist at their mercy in this world. You and I have the power to break this game, *and* their rules!"

-Evolution-

End

END OF PART I

(shin'yuu) = dear friend; (Yoriyoshi) = freedom. Etymologically, Darwin=dear friend; Charles=free man. I thought it was a cute idea.

You can see http://hinata0321.deviantart.com/gallery/55616807/At-the-End-of-Days for my dA folder of art for this story; but beware of possible spoilers for later chapters, if you're not caught up!

Now that we're caught up to the FFnet version, to be continued with weekly updates once I finish writing the story!

Interlude: Longing at the End of Days

Chapter 10: Interlude: Longing at the End of Days

A brief anecdote of a time two years after the Fall, in which Satsuki learns of one emotion Ryuuko has never shared with her.

Sorry, but this actually isn't the start of part II! I've still got about three more chapters to finish before I'll be done writing, and ready to get down to posting the rest of the story at a steady rate. But for now, here's an 'interlude' that I originally wrote a while back without planning to post. Please see the question in the end notes after you're through the chapter.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

AT THE END OF DAYS

Interlude \ Longing - - At the End of Days

SECOND WINTER SINCE THE FALL OF HONNOUJI ACADEMY

The evening was a peaceful one. What remained of their cooking fire crackled lazily in the heart of their temporary abode - presently, not one of their proper hideouts, but a cramped cave where they'd sheltered from the light snowfall outside. Ryuuko sat leaning against a wall, propped up by the duffel bag behind her for extra support.

Satsuki had found a comfortable position seated between Ryuuko's legs, head resting back on the younger woman's chest, back against her toned stomach. Ryuuko's arms hung loosely about Satsuki's middle, snug, holding in place the heavy blanket bundled about them both.

Despite the cold of the night, the two companions were at ease like this; with some time yet before they would sleep, they were content, in amicable silence, to simply lie together enjoying the warmth they'd presently achieved.

This was, until Satsuki let an offhand question into the air.

"Why do you go off on your own sometimes? Like you did earlier."

Ryuuko was certain Satsuki had caught her flinch - just as she knew the nonchalance of her sister's tone was not to be mistaken for indifference. A deductive sort, Satsuki was not one to broadcast curiosity readily, but rather if it was piqued, she would demand its answer simply and expect to receive one.

Still, Ryuuko was baffled. She was grateful that in their present arrangement, Satsuki wouldn't see her warming face. "… I kinda' figured you'd never asked because you probably assumed - correctly - what it is."

Ryuuko deftly averted her gaze, a stiff smile plastered clumsily on her face as Satsuki turned her head enough to give her a look. "I haven't asked because it's never been a problem. It's still not; you're hardly ever away for more than a half hour. You never run off while there's work to be done, and it's always when we're in a safe area. But in fact… it's *so* regular, it's curious. Where do you slip off to?"

She's pulling my leg, right? Cripes… Now sweating, Ryuuko selected her words carefully. "Nowhere in particular, you know… It's just… something I have to take care of from time to time."

Satsuki furrowed her brow. Ryuuko rarely brought back any scavenged supplies or such when she sauntered back after one of the absences - or if she did, they were more often like chance finds, afterthoughts rather than plausible objectives. Nonetheless, Satsuki frowned. “If you need to do something, let me help you.”

“You don’t wanna help with this!” Ryuuko practically snapped back, flustered, and suddenly enough to nearly make Satsuki jump.

“At least tell me what it is!” Satsuki said, quickly growing irate.

“It’s not even anything important!”

“Is it something I *can* help with?”

Satsuki looked back again when silence answered her; she watched Ryuuko’s lip wrinkle, as thoughts darted behind the younger woman’s eyes. “… Probably?” Ryuuko settled on at last, uncharacteristically cautious. Satsuki felt the warm arms around her tighten briefly. Then they loosened.

“Ryuuko…?”

“Could you… turn around toward me, for a second?”

It was downright odd for Ryuuko to ask something so meekly. Curious now at her manner, Satsuki did as requested, and eyed her expectantly.

Ryuuko’s eyebrows were drawn inward, taut as her nerves, but she didn’t try to avoid Satsuki’s gaze anymore. Calming, she took a breath and reached tentatively upward, hand brushing Satsuki’s cheek.

“Please… let me try something.”

‘Please’? Satsuki’s mind was echoing in bewilderment as Ryuuko pressed her lips to hers.

The long-haired woman froze for one moment, as her heart stuttered on a beat.

But the immediate revulsion curling in her gut faded as quickly. This was Ryuuko. In a way, she realized, that was enough.

In a way, it wasn't. But moreover, Ryuuko's hands did not hold her, and Satsuki was above her, free to pull away at any moment. The contact was gentle; even the impatient little presses of Ryuuko's lips were soft, somehow docile.

Yearning… this is one emotion you've never shared with me, isn't it?

Above shut eyes, the younger woman's brow was inclined tensely inward with the emotion - and as seconds passed, with fear of what she'd tried and fear that her companion wouldn't respond. If either party was vulnerable here, it was not Satsuki.

With this thought, she shut her eyes, and at the next tentative nudge Satsuki answered her - returned the pressure, moving and figuring out how to move.

A small, muffled whine of delight came from Ryuuko, almost cutely relieved. Inwardly, Satsuki smirked at such an uncharacteristic noise. Outwardly, she kept up her side of the soft, experimental exchange until they pulled apart.

Ryuuko's eyes were foggy as they opened halfway, above darkened cheeks, to find Satsuki peering down at her. Satsuki licked her lips, the tip of her tongue passing and gone in a deft flicker of pink; then she noticed Ryuuko's hand, on hers, pressing gently before loosening to guide her hand toward Ryuuko's chest.

"Ryuuko…"

"O-onee-san," Ryuuko almost whimpered. Her voice high, but with barely more force to it than the breath that melted visibly into the air.

She bit her lip momentarily, squirming in anticipation. “If you c-could… please- Oh-,”

Satsuki’s hand grasped once. She studied Ryuuko’s face closely, as the short-haired woman’s head turned and a groan rumbled hungrily in her throat.

She waited, motionless, eyes pinched shut until Satsuki sighed. There was yet another ‘please’ in those tender eyes, in that mouth with flushed lips slightly ajar. With an empathic look, Satsuki shook her head.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I can’t, after all.”

A timidly questioning look, from eyes dazed, almost pained with want. Satsuki shook her head again.

“Even if I want to… This…”

Ryuuko swallowed a hushed gasp as Satsuki’s hand grazed her breast in moving away. But the elder sister’s smile was sad.

“It’s not a gesture of love, to me. So, to you… I almost certainly can’t do it.”

In a moment, Ryuuko shut her eyes and nodded. “I’m sorry, for suddenly…”

Satsuki shushed, pressing a slender finger to the girl’s lips. She managed a smirk. “This was my first time being kissed by someone I hold dear… someone I trust. That’s something. Thank you for it…”

Ryuuko’s eyes saddened. “Nee-san…”

“So, when you leave, you’re…?”

“Most people do… did, by around our age.”

“I understand… but I don’t seem to feel such desires to begin with. I’m sorry. I guess that’s one thing I’ve got easier than you out here, isn’t it?”

“Do you think you might’ve had… er, ‘desires’? I mean, if… if not for…”

“Maybe… but it’s not something I can easily imagine.”

“Sorry…”

Satsuki shook her head. “What you’ve been ‘taking care of’ on your own, I’ve never thought to do to myself. And I’m fine with that… So while it is rather endearing to know my blustering little rogue is so easily reduced to needy mewling, I couldn’t bear to hold that power over you while I have no need of reciprocation.”

“I guess…” But Ryuuko’s face remained downcast.

“Don’t look that way,” Satsuki chided. “I do not simply reject you. Truly… if I were to trust anyone to be with me in such a way, at this point, it would have to be you.”

“I’m kind of the only person you know, at this point,” Ryuuko pointed out blandly.

“Should that undermine it? Would you claim the trust I feel is less significant, for that?”

At Ryuuko’s expression, she smiled.

“Before the world became like this… I was a person who couldn’t begin to trust someone this way.” Her face was thoughtful. “Do you know? The first time I embraced you, I was exceedingly uncomfortable.” *But I knew you ached for the warmth I could offer, even if I could not comprehend it.* She settled at Ryuuko’s side, folding an arm across her middle. “By now,” she said, before the

surprised girl might apologize again, “truthfully, even I quite enjoy holding you like this. So perhaps… someday…”

She trailed into a light, drowsy yawn as Ryuuko patted her back. “You know,” Ryuuko picked up quietly, “It might sound like some kind of ‘last person on earth’ sorta leaning, but I don’t care. I think… I don't think I'd call myself unfortunate, to be stuck with ‘only’ you, you know? However it sucks that the world turned out like this…”

Satsuki ruffled her hair fondly. “I understand that I *am* the only person available to you for such a thing. I can attempt to be more accommodating…”

“You don’t have to push yourself for me,” Ryuuko assured her.

“Of course,” Satsuki said. “Well… if the time does come that I’m ready to explore such things, I’ll know who to ask.”

“Just about the only person you *can* ask?”

“Yes,” Satsuki laughed. “And I’m fine with that, too.”

Ryuuko grinned. “Then I’m just fine with waiting ’til then. But… until then, actually… wanna forget about this?”

“Forget it?”

“Let’s say it never happened. I mean… for now, I’m pretty happy with being able to chill with you like this, and feel your warmth, without thinking anything of it. More than that, I don’t want to lose nights like this…”

“You don’t have to worry about that,” Satsuki said. “It’s too cold to sleep alone.”

“Sis!” Ryuuko complained, as Satsuki chuckled.

“Okay,” Satsuki said, “I’m forgetting about it, right now.”

The younger woman huffed, snuggling a bit closer for good measure. “Alright, good.”

The cave grew darker; the fire’s last embers glowed determinedly, soon to fade.

“… Ryuuko?”

“Hm?”

“Are you truly… alright with me?”

“… *Alright* ? With *you* ?”

Satsuki didn’t understand the tone, but she couldn’t see her face.

She wondered if Ryuuko had simply fallen asleep, before a hesitant whisper edged out to her.

“… Is it weird… if I might feel more than ‘alright’?”

Satsuki let out a breath, halfway to a laugh. “In a world with no society, and a life with no clear future… it can’t be 'weirder' than agonizing over what is permissible between us. I care about you, and you trust me… that might be enough. This world is too harsh to beat yourself up over it, either way.”

“So I’m - *not* weird?”

Satsuki really had to suppress a laugh now, as she felt Ryuuko’s weight shift to nuzzle closer. “No,” she answered successfully, for her quietly flustered sister’s sake. “Relax, Ryuuko. I won't pass judgment on you over something like that. If you seek to be judged that badly, however, your sewing is deplorably crude, and your eating habits…”

“Okay, okay! I got it.… Sis?”

“What is it now?”

“You’re beautiful.”

“…”

“Wh-what?” she defended. “It’s true! I j-just…” A pause. “I want you to know that. If you didn’t know. I-I mean…”

“What are you babbling about, you child?”

Catching the lighthearted tone, it was now Ryuuko who snickered. “Nothin’. You know me.”

Satsuki smiled in the darkness. Quiet, dark, with just her sister’s warmth to accompany her. It was a strange sort of peace, for certain, but not an unwelcome one. Her eyes shut.

“Sleep well, you child.”

“G’night, sis.”

Thank you for loving me.

Thank you for being here.

-Longing-

End

Well, wrote this a while back (before I wrote chapters 2 and 3, even, though chapters 2-6 were originally written out of order) with no intention of ever posting it, because while I ship it, I'd decided I couldn't quite feel okay with writing sisters together. But the more I thought about it, the less odd it seemed to touch if only briefly upon, given the setting.

The scenario being extreme as it is -- a dangerous, stressful life, no society -- we've already seen that they've grown emotionally intimate, depending on, supporting, and caring for each other. But assuming Ryuuko has an average drive, and sees a practical lack of other long-term 'prospects' at any given point or any forseeable point in the future, it doesn't seem unthinkable that she'd develop a specific interest in Satsuki, however sisterly their relationship generally is.

Frankly, I'd say this doesn't complicate the other levels of their bond much. And on principle, I generally hate seeing romance pulled for fanservice into an adventure story where it doesn't belong… but while it wouldn't become a major part of the story, it's not written to be particularly romantic or fanservicey, either -- just another element of their life together at the end of days (the fact that Ryuuko gets horny sometimes, and Satsuki might or might not have eventually grown comfortable with helping her get off). So while the overall course of the story is set at this point, I'm a bit stuck on whether I want to exclude this detail.

There are occasional references to this topic later in the story that could be tweaked and omitted as I'm finalizing things, without affecting continuity. I know some may be uncomfortable with the incest pairing, and I'd like to consider the opinions of those who would prefer to see them continue being purely platonic here.

TL;DR: Would anyone rather not have this alluded to any further, and let it remain ambiguous/up to imagination how (if at all) things progressed from this point? Would those who enjoy seeing them as platonic feel that enjoyment of the story compromised otherwise? Would you prefer it kept to the 'pairing if you squint' ambiguity it's had up to now? (Either way, sexually explicit material will not be included in this story). If you feel strongly, thoughts on this would be appreciated!

Rebels at the End of Days

Chapter 11: Rebels at the End of Days

To the light of a faint spark of hope, wanderers once more become rebels. Two rebels now assess the weapons at their disposal and the question they must answer. 'How might we go about saving what's left of this world?'

Here we are with the start of Part II! Writing of the story isn't quite complete, but the climax is written, and everything's about squared away at this point. I've got ten more typed and proofread chapters (12 to 21) stockpiled as well, so we're looking at weekly updates from here on.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

AT THE END OF DAYS

Eleven \ Rebels - - At the End of Days

-"*When I took your power… I felt invincible. It was* terrifying.*"*-

Steely blue eyes peered over a half-bridge of fingers, idly tracking the rise and fall of the prone woman's chest. Ryuuko rarely snored. The borderline obnoxious noise blaring in a slow rhythm from the figure sprawled on the sofa spoke of exhaustion, Satsuki supposed.

-"*So, even with the small amount you leeched…"*

"*It was insane. Like you couldn't even believe. I felt like I could do anything…"-*

Satsuki's toes on one foot curled restlessly.

-"*And could you… save what's left of this world?"*

"*I don't know how, but if… with more, if I used it right… maybe. It'd make* something *happen."*

"*And should you use it 'wrong'…?"-*

Satsuki stood with a restrained swaying of long hair, partially bound as it was by the bandaging tape about the level of her forehead, and drew the Bakuzan Gako with the arm that did not rest in a sling. She was momentarily lightheaded, simply feeling the sure press of her breath against the bandaging about bruised ribs, and standing motionless but for the notable tremble of her hand, and the shortsword brandished in it.

Ryuuko's eyes then had been large, shaken, filled with awe and genuine fear. The memory of her voice came clear and bleak.

-"*That's the terrifying part."-*

WHOOSH…

Her feet danced nimbly about someone's scattered belongings and trash on the abandoned house's floor as she swung the blade gracefully through a series of moves. All was silent but for the muted hum of furious strikes, and the rumble of Ryuuko's coarse snores on the air.

She flipped the sword and caught the hilt again, smoothly reversing her grip to stab another phantom foe before spinning into a slash.

Her knee disagreed with the move; her foot twisted under her at the joint's painful protest, and she slipped onto her backside - aching

abdominals catching her an inch short of bumping the couch where Ryuuko slumbered.

She lowered the blade instinctively poised before her.

The tip was pointed forward. An illogical move.

"I chose to strike…" she murmured. "Not to block."

With a sigh she returned the blade to its sheath, and leaned back to rest her head on the couch cushion behind it, just in contact with Ryuuko's head and shoulder. She turned her head, taking in the girl's dozing face.

-"*Have your legs still not healed?"*

"*Would* your *legs have healed by now?"*

"*Ryuuko."*

"*I… I don't wanna push it, okay? I'm blocking the Fibers' power again now. I'm - kind of scared not to."*

"*I see…"*

"*Sorry… I feel a little stronger, either way. Give me a few hours, I'd bet."*

"*Alright. Let's find a place to rest."-*

Satsuki smiled wearily, listening to Ryuuko's snores on full blast. She twisted a bit, adjusting a partially displaced blanket so that it covered her sister again.

After the torture you went through, you walked away from that deathmatch - or rather, were carried away after *it - with merely two broken ankles and two broken knees. Matoi Ryuuko… you can frighten me like no other.*

Yet, your face in repose…

… remains rather precious.

There is a heady scent in the air - sweet, overpowering. It tickles her nose, but not unpleasantly.

She has the sense of floating - adrift, or perhaps overall motionless, in a sea of liquid light. Her surroundings fill her mouth, her nostrils, her pores; she is conscious of what it will look like before she opens her eyes, though to her knowledge she has never before visited such a space.

"*What the…?"*

A presence flits across her senses like a spark. She frowns.

"*Show yourself!"*

"*Calm… There is no cause for alarm."*

The voice is all around her - inside her. Gently it stirs the warm orange light, and shakes her bones.

"*How is this setting? Does it relax you?"*

She clenches her teeth against a sense of disarming calm that has indeed begun to permeate her. "Who the hell are you?"

"*Species: Homo sapiens. Sex: female. Life Fiber infusion: one. Kiryuuin: one. Purity: zero. Age: 7545 earth days. Compatibility class: special. Saturation -**bzzztt-!** Identifier: Matoi, Ryuuko. I know, just by touching you, who* you *are. Do you know who I am?"*

Ryuuko gives a distasteful glare. Is it mocking her? "… I've got an idea. How are you talking to me?"

"*Every Life Fiber on this planet is a part of me. You, too, are a part of me."*

"*Alright… sure. Let's say I am, and you know all there is to know about me."*

"*I do. Your body's Life Fibers are bound to your nervous system, your energy, and your every experience; they grow more aware with each passing day, and thus they comprehend even your language and thoughts. I know more about you than you can begin to comprehend of yourself."*

At that comes an angry scowl, its owner not unreasonably self-conscious. "Then why? Why reach out to me? You guys just can't seem to ignore us and let us waste away our lives in peace, can ya'?"

"*It is true that you and your human are… an unusual element."*

It is only inwardly that Ryuuko frowns at its phrasing.… But then, it'll catch that, too, won't it? Is there a line between thought and speech in such a place? The other hadn't bothered to give itself a form, as she had… Keep talking*, she decides. Whether it hears them or not, it evidently won't respond to her 'thoughts.'*

"*You don't say?" she says at last. A sardonic smile broadens on her face. "So you turn Yoriyoshi into a humanform weapon to sic on us, and quick enough I'm gettin' a visit from the one that started it all. The head hancho! What gives? We're right, aren't we - it's the only explanation."*

"*Oh?"*

"*The more you mess with us, the clearer it is that we can threaten you. And the more you try to hide stuff from us, the more intently we'll search out the truth. If there were nothin' there, you'd have nothin' to hide. Like, why didn't you list my 'saturation' when you*

were flaunting what a smart little shit you are, just now? It must be important. I'll keep it in mind."

"*You're quite the discerning specimen, aren't you?"*

Ryuuko bristles; even with its strange, multifaceted voice, this time she knows mockery when she hears it. "Yeah, yeah, laugh it up. But everything you do, you do for a reason. Life Fibers were dormant for a while; now they ain't. That you chose this era to harvest us means we've reached a high point or something, right? A high point we'd never pick out on our own… but it's there. Something changed in us. Maybe it's something you need from us, but it's also the key to stopping you."

"*Hm… It's true. Humans, as they are, are perfect."*

Ryuuko grins triumphantly, until it continues.

"***However****… Kiryuuin are* ***imperfect****."*

"*Huh?"*

"*You executed the final Kiryuuin to have attained perfection, with your own hands. You and the defect, both born incomplete, yet in ignorance so confident and proud of your condition… !"*

"*You're full of shit!" she cries - though the anger looming in its voice is disconcerting. It spoke of other humans almost lovingly. It is now like an artist scowling before a painted canvas, at a work completed but unsatisfyingly so. "Humans are strong! And Kiryuuin are - me and Satsuki are - the strongest around! There's a way to turn your plan on its head, and we'll find it!"*

"*Such optimism…"*

"*It's the truth!"*

"*Then why, in your boundless cleverness, do you so conveniently elect to assume our observation indicates fear of your own power?*

You are mistaken; if we sought to destroy you, it would be simple as… Oh, how would that amusing creature have put it? The enigma with the extraordinary compatibility… 'Casting a loathsome insect into the flames,' perhaps?"

"*Bastard… !"*

"*It is you who lives blinded by fear. It is true that we have taken an interest in you, but it is not because you endanger us. It is the* ***opposite****."*

Her blood goes cold.

And Ryuuko woke with a start, only to instantly yelp at the pain in her knees.

"What, did you choke on your snores?"

"I *don't* snore," Ryuuko spat automatically, glaring at the Kiryuuin leaning against the couch.

Satsuki turned her head to give Ryuuko a pointed look. Ryuuko blushed.

"No way!"

"Check the area," Satsuki said.

"Already am. It's clear."

The long-haired woman studied her. "Are you alright?"

"I'm just great. Slept like a rock."

"Hm…"

"Uh… Sis…" Ryuuko began, as Satsuki returned to her prior task.

"What is it?" Satsuki asked, glaring intently at a piece of silverware in her hand.

"… You're just doing that because you *can*, aren't you?"

The spoon in Satsuki's hand folded at the middle, twisting backwards in a smooth shudder from where she did not touch. "To *see* if I can, Ryuuko."

"Riiight," she drawled, eyeing the pile of similarly warped and ruined cutlery Satsuki tossed it into. Ryuuko reached down, covering Satsuki's hand with hers as she was reaching back into a nearly empty drawer on the ground she'd pulled from somewhere. *How long was I out…?* She shook her head, glancing at the less than definitive glow of the nearest window. "You get some rest now. I'll wake you up if I sense anything, but my legs should be fine pretty soon. If you can just help me down from here…"

"No need. I can sleep where I am," Satsuki said, resting her head beside Ryuuko's on the couch.

"But…"

Ryuuko blinked. Satsuki was either ignoring her, or already asleep. Sighing, she brushed her hand over Satsuki's, and then drew a fork quietly from the drawer.

"Acting all cool," she muttered, focusing on the utensil.

The things we know… Kiryuuin are different. Somehow.

In a minute she groaned and bent the fork with her hand. "Whatever."

She rested her head back on the armrest, settling for the boring, immobile watch shift ahead. Oh, well.

She sniffed. Satsuki's hair smelled nice. Nothing flowery, no, and not great by any means, but nice enough. How the hell she managed

that, with the cheap shampoo she'd washed the blood out of her hair with earlier, was anyone's guess.

Ryuuko chuckled, gazing at the ceiling.

Our power is in the two of us, together… so I'd better hurry up and heal. But, still…

Imperfect or whatever it all means… I feel pretty safe with you right here.

And for now…

Her eyes flitted to the side, resting on her older sister's slumbering form. Satsuki's stern face had become one of cool calm; even her long body's flawless sitting posture had slackened in repose.

Ryuuko smiled. The sight brought her solace.

Your sleeping face… It's so peaceful.

"Hey."

Blue eyes fluttered open at the whisper, and the accompanying touch to her shoulder. Immediately her face was hard. She looked back at Ryuuko with a question in her eyes; receiving a nod, she selected the Bakuzan Kouryuu with her good hand, and stood.

"Wait!" Ryuuko whispered, grasping at her sister's T-shirt from where she still lay on the couch.

"How many cores."

"One, I think. I could be wrong-,"

"Is it exceptionally powerful?"

"W-well, no, but-,"

"I will take care of it."

"I said, wait! I woke you so you could stay alert, not hunt it down!" Her brow worried. "Please, just… let's sit this one out, sis."

"Your knees haven't healed." An observation.

"Knees are weird. I need a little longer."

Satsuki regarded her momentarily. Then she turned her back, pulling free. "Do you doubt I can do this, Ryuuko?" she asked, using the Kouryuu to flick its shorter companion into the air. She seized the dagger's hilt in her teeth, and looked back at the younger woman with a bitter glare.

It looked ridiculous. The effectiveness of the necessary cross-slash motion would suffer, however she went about it. But one arm in a sling, one hand holding a sword, and her teeth snarled about a dagger hilt, she looked so strong. Weaker than she'd been in a while, yet still terrifyingly strong. And Ryuuko found that there was no way in hell she doubted Satsuki could do as she intended.

The elder sister turned to go.

As she made for the door, she heard a curse behind her - then shifting, an odd pair of crunching noises, and the thumping of clumsy footsteps. She turned back, eyes surprised as Ryuuko grabbed her arm.

"I'm going, too!" Ryuuko panted. "Whether ya' need me or not."

A dagger dropped neatly from teeth to hand. "… You just reawakened your Life Fibers, in a panic."

"I know what you're gonna say, but I've got 'em suppressed again already, s-so…"

Satsuki shook her head. Her look was thoughtful. "If you can control them that well… *use* them." Her lip wrinkled, only briefly. "… They

were right about one thing, about humans; it's not in us to sit still forever. Years ago, you began to hold yourself back… so that you could exist with me as a human, correct? We didn't say it… but we'd resolved that there was nothing more we could do but survive. If we're truly planning to make things move now, we'll need to begin sorting out the weapons at our disposal."

Ryuuko nodded, but there was apprehension in her eyes. "So… for now, let's…"

"'Kick its ass,' right?"

Ryuuko choked on a suppressed laugh, pulling the compact rending scissors from her pocket and expanding them as the two headed out.

Two figures trekked up a hill on a forested path. A leader, with graceful alertness and immaculate posture, trailed by another who slurped eagerly from a water bottle.

Satsuki glanced back. "You've gotten stronger."

Sealing the water bottle, Ryuuko gave a refreshed sigh and pitched the vessel Satsuki's way. As she did, the younger woman shrugged. "It really wasn't that tough of a cluster, in the end…"

Satsuki was unscrewing the bottle's cap again. "No. While the enemy *was* rather unremarkable, even with you suppressing your Life Fibers to minimal activity again, you've become stronger."

"I guess… I feel a little different." She studied her hand. "What I did to Yoriyoshi, when he was dying… it'd probably be impossible to be completely the same, after something like that."

"Just 'a little different'? You didn't manage to get yourself stabbed, even once."

"Ha, ha," Ryuuko said sarcastically, though she spared a sidelong smirk for the cool optimism in Satsuki's eye.

Satsuki tipped the water bottle to her lips, to no effect. She then upended it, to her disbelief, to free the few drops remaining. Eyes once more severe, she sent the empty bottle glancing off a sheepish Ryuuko's forehead, sending her tumbling down the hill.

Two figures now stood side by side, stances identical.

-"*I am a force. A physical push or pull, or a force of nature, or a military squadron - I am as any such thing, as I will it." One speaks; the other listens, eyes shut.-*

It was a short, simple series of moves. Ryuuko's motions were matching hers more and more accurately as the repetitions continued.

-"*As Kiryuuin, I am a force in this world, whose actions will serve its fate."-*

The two now assumed the initial stance before a pair of trees. Without a word, both struck out - a palm smoothly thrust to within an inch of the tree bark. The striking hand withdrew slightly, arcing to sweep across in a cutting motion before the tree's trunk before the trailing hand thrust forward.

-"*Can you see it? The power within you?"*

"*I dunno. What's it supposed to look like?"-*

"Ha!"

Their actions had been as one.

The tree before Satsuki split flawlessly along the plane of the hand chop. In the same moment, the tree before Ryuuko exploded into

splintering wood about the general level of her strikes.

The short-haired woman grimaced, watching as Satsuki's tree was felled neatly. "W-well, that was still *something*, right?"

Satsuki sighed, snatching a scrap of falling wood from the air. "You have a great deal of power, as expected, and the ability to tap it. But it seems you cannot focus it effectively." She raised a brow at the mess of jagged wood, and the row of trees - always of pairs of randomly demolished ones and ones cut with clean consistency - trailing up to their present location. "It's as if… you're restricted to using hand grenades to try to light a candle."

"No way in hell would a hand grenade even… Oh, screw you." Ryuuko rubbed her neck, looking down. "Well, I'm no good with the hereditary witchcraft, then. It was worth a shot…"

"It is no deficiency of your own," Satsuki assured her, detecting her disappointment. Or was she concerned with disappointing Satsuki? This exercise *had* been the older sister's idea… "This outcome was not unanticipated, truly. Our aptitude for manipulating our innate energies comes to fruition only if honed diligently from a young age to adulthood. As it develops, we are meant to continually culture and store it as physical and spiritual energy in our bodies."

Ryuuko straightened. "So it's like - like skill points that expire if you don't allot them anywhere!"

"… Like *what* ?"

"Never mind. Continue, continue."

Satsuki raised a brow. "Your bioenergy or *ki*, unaccessed for most of your life, has solidified as is - a vast pool of unrefined power. It is in all likelihood impossible for you to wield your ki as a trained Kiryuuin, at this point, no matter how much time we spend."

"Good to know, I guess…" Ryuuko chuckled. Her look became reflective. "It's weird, you know… the old hag called herself the ultimate lifeform - the skills of a fully realized Kiryuuin, and the power of Life Fiber infusion, all wrapped up in one human body. But the two of us… we have power, together. Like you and me were made to work together, sure as human energy was meant to synergize with Life Fibers. So maybe neither of us is any sort of self-contained, ultimate being, but all in all, what we got goin' for us is pretty solid, right?"

Satsuki smiled, looking up at the first drops of light rain. "Yes. If the only way we can do this is together, in harmony… it might be something even more remarkable."

The two spent the afternoon and evening huddled in the mouth of a metro station, while a thunderstorm raged forbiddingly outside. They heated a large can of potato soup over a fire that burned warmly on a combination of neatly cut logs and scraps of jagged kindling.

"Let us review what we know," Satsuki said, passing the can - with a rag wrapped around the outside for insulation - and a spoon to Ryuuko, after eating a few bites. "Things that might aid us in determining a course of action."

"Such as…?" Ryuuko began, blowing on a steaming spoonful.

Satsuki nodded toward her. "If you are placed in mortal peril - if you receive severe wounds, or near starvation - your power of will over your Life Fibers suffers. Your Life Fibers and their capabilities have been evolving, possibly due to gradual assimilation of stray, residual Fibers from when you manage to get skewered in battle-,"

Satsuki's irate look was immediate as she heard the spoon clink to the ground. She stopped short of scolding her sister, though, as she saw an uneasy look on Ryuuko's face, and thought she heard her murmur a word.

"Saturation…" Noticing Satsuki studying her, she almost jumped again. "Sorry," she said, snatching up the spoon and eliciting a cringe as she stuck the dirt-encrusted utensil into her mouth in a way of cleaning. She spat, already sticking the now slobbery spoon head into the flame. "Go on - I'm listening. Where were you?"

Satsuki's head cocked to the smallest degree, her eyes cool as Ryuuko quickly stuffed a new spoonful of soup into her mouth, heedless of the heat, to make clear it was still Satsuki's turn to speak. "… You have the ability to absorb and harness human energy, which you can store, as a human, or expend, using your Life Fibers. You have the Kiryuuin power of accessing your ki, but can only manipulate it in brute shoves… Things like that."

Ryuuko's face was reflective as she swallowed her bite of soup. "Okay. The Kiryuuin bloodline is weird. You… we have a metric crapton more innate energy than average, and it remains in… flux? Yeah - in flux, and continuously generating, especially from adolescence to early adulthood. Through training, Kiryuuin would enhance their strength and resilience, reflexes, and senses…"

"Correct," Satsuki said as Ryuuko passed the soup back. It wasn't precisely as she had taught her, but that it remained accurate in Ryuuko's own words said more for the younger girl's comprehension. "But even at their baseline, our bodies are physically enigmatic. Well before your Life Fibers awakened, you must have wondered at your strength, as you raised hell in your school days…? But add long-term ki refinement to that, and we grow into powers ordinary humans find outright confounding…"

"Yeah - so, Kiryuuin are ridiculous. Check." She gave a quick thanks as the now lukewarm soup came back to her. "Then, round that out with active energy manipulation, and you get into the superhuman feats like bending spoons or cutting really nice firewood. Or blinding people!" she tacked on snidely.

Satsuki gave her an annoyed look. "Again with this? Ryuuko, I cannot physically blind-,"

"You physically mauled a drawer-ful of silverware earlier. If you really felt like it, I betcha' you could fuck up someone's eyes easy."

Satsuki's mouth shut on her budding retort, and she blinked in surprise as she mulled the thought. Actually, if she were to… at close range… "Focus," she reminded her, shaking her head and accepting the soup again. "Facts. The Kiryuuin were called shepherds. Our common personality traits seem to support this role. It's also no coincidence that the facial structure and physical features that humans find to convey competency and leadership are prominent traits in the Kiryuuin. On top of all this, we were given powers enabling us to exude charisma, and project consequence over the masses. If we conduct ourselves correctly, when we walk, other humans feel inclined to fall into step behind people like us… Even you, unaware of and unable to touch your power, unfailingly wound up an influential member of any petty gang you joined, did you not? Without seeking power, you gained it."

"Yet the Kiryuuin are born flawed…"

Satsuki paused before taking a bite. "… Where did you hear that?"

Ryuuko started. "Y-Yoriyoshi's Fusion said something like that while you were out cold. Yeah - he claimed Ragyou was perfect, and the two of us remain flawed… or something."

"Or something, huh…" Satsuki handed the last of the soup back. "The Kiryuuin have some manner of evolutionary advantage. It's not as if the line was speciated from humankind - you and I being fathered by Souichiro, originally an outsider, proves as much - but our… mutation, is intricate and extensive. The Kiryuuin are a specialized, anomalous type of human, the product of a focused effort of artificial selection."

"For a higher 'purpose'…" Ryuuko picked up. "But Life Fibers absorb human energy. Or, we were made this way to be fed upon by Life Fibers. Our power's their power, so they *needed* to make us strong

to get the most out of us. But what if they screwed up? Ain't there a chance they made us *too* strong?"

Satsuki smirked. "Can the designs of 'gods' yield such errors?"

"Errors, huh?" Ryuuko crushed the empty can in her hand, grinning combatively. Hers was the look of a cutthroat who'd smelled blood. "I saw the Fusion's fear when I looked at him. Whatever I did back there, they didn't anticipate it. Anyway, if I can kill 'em, they ain't no gods. So you bet your ass they can make errors; two of them are sitting right here, eating soup."

Satsuki smiled. "Let us return to *facts*, Ryuuko," she chided gently.

"Okay. So humans reached a high point. We're the strongest humans alive. Ergo, if anyone can stop them, it's us."

Satsuki nodded in acquiescence to the line of logic, even as she took note of Ryuuko's seeming fixation with it. "However… Life Fibers sought desperately to ensure the Kiryuuin could be controlled."

"That's why they got them passing down customs of Life Fiber worship, right? And it worked for a long time, until…" Ryuuko gestured at Satsuki with a grin.

"There's more than the teachings alone, I'm afraid…" Satsuki remained quiet a minute, in thought. "We are Life Fibers' ideal hosts. Yet if we boast such an abundance of energy, and exceptional Life Fiber compatibility, why not simply have encouraged the human race to evolve along the same path? Instead, the opposite is seen; Kiryuuin throughout the ages perpetuated in a single main line, numbers carefully controlled. That things were as they were suggests that some risk to Life Fibers is entailed… And, also…"

Ryuuko studied her as Satsuki frowned, gazing too fiercely into the flames as shadows danced on her face. "Also…?"

The older sister's glinting eyes shut. "Relative to most humans, despite our superior physical compatibility with Life Fibers, we are actually born with remarkably poor mental resistance to them."

"Wait - seriously?"

A nod. "Yet the finest among ordinary humans could not hope to control clothing containing excess of thirty percent Life Fibers. It would overtake them easily. The fact that this weakness was bred so strongly into us, and yet you and I once wore kamui…"

Satsuki's brow furrowed.

"Sis…?" Ryuuko began.

"Forgive me… Let us call it a night, Ryuuko. We can figure out where we'll go from here in the morning."

"A-actually… I do kind of have a place in mind."

"Hm?"

Now it was Ryuuko's eyes that were lost in the dancing flames. "There's something I wanna check."

-Rebels-

End

Oh gosh, an exposition dump? I'm sorry ;-;

Chapter sub-title literal meaning: - treachery, rebellion, insurrection. (I think I'll start mentioning these in end notes, since sometimes I intentionally use a Japanese sub-title that doesn't match the English title)

I'll probably post here on AO3 before ffnet, since I tend to glance at new chapters every now and then for a few days after posting and somehow always catch more errors I missed in proofreading. So I'll plan to post here, and update there after a small delay so I hopefully won't have to edit too many errors in two places.

Scheming at the End of Days

Chapter 12: Scheming at the End of Days

The two consider Ryuuko's ability to draw on human energy, and Satsuki explains another result of the Kiryuuin's careful breeding.

Warning: mentions of past abuse

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

AT THE END OF DAYS

Twelve \ Scheming - - At the End of Days

Satsuki rose before Ryuuko, that morning.

It had been a cold night on dry leaves they'd gathered to spread on the tile floor. In the course of it, one or both of them had unconsciously maximized contact - though Satsuki had instinctively kept the hand that grasped the unsheathed Bakuzan Gako away from the embrace. That hand was cold.

Gently Satsuki extricated herself from her sister's clinging limbs, and shifted away from her side with a light yawn. *Little fool…* Ryuuko would swear up and down that she'd never been the cuddly type, never liked to cling. Even when she had lived with the Mankanshoku girl, who apparently had been far more keen on such tendencies, Ryuuko claimed she had never picked up the habit.

Would she purport Satsuki was responsible for their frequent entanglement, then? The Kiryuuin snorted good-naturedly at the thought.

Looking back, she reached to push a lock of dark hair from across the sleeping girl's face, and paused.

Sighing, she grasped the Bakuzan Kouryuu, and walked from the station.

-"*You want to try on Junketsu…? Dear girl… you will not be able to wear something named 'Purity' properly until you have become a fully realized Kiryuuin - perfected, as am I."*-

Before the dawn sun, feet splashing through puddles and dewy grass, Satsuki moved slowly, smoothly through sword forms. It was not often that she voluntarily dwelled on thoughts of Kiryuuin Ragyou.

What did she mean? She thought, as a blade sliced a falling leaf in two, then four. *What did she mean?*

She must have said something useful. But when…? Think… !

But all she could think of was a putridly bright smile, a sultry voice, and zealous eyes dark with greed.

-"*You are an imperfect being… and so, must be purified."*-

It had been said so simply, as if it were natural.

-Merciless eyes, picking her apart. Icy hands, everywhere she didn't want them-

She stumbled; eyes wide, she caught her footing and lashed out before her, savage. Panting, she held the position.

-"'*Stop,' you say?" A sneeringly scandalized tone, the feigned indignation raking. "Silly girl…"*

"*P-p-please, no! What are- y-you d-doing?" That voice - once, it really had been capable of being reduced to such a frail, pitiful squeak-*

Not that. Forget that and focus!

There must be a clue somewhere. If anyone would have known a way to defeat the Life Fibers… it would have been the one tasked and trusted with protecting them. She would have known every secret.

Her hand shook; the obsidian blade glinted in the light.

… *Did I miscalculate? If I had continued the ruse, let her complete the experiment at the Culture and Sports Grand Festival, would I have gotten more information, with her trust…?*

No. That was never an option-

CLANG!

She had whirled, squarely blocking the strike of a scissor blade at her head. Her shocked eyes narrowed in annoyance, hair dancing as a resounding, metallic clang of collision rang in the air around them.

"'Morning," Ryuuko said with a grin, feet falling to the earth.

Satsuki raised a brow at the cheerfully combative girl, irksome as she found her blades held off but the rounded, outer edge of a scissor. "Soft."

"You know me!" Ryuuko said, miniaturizing the scissor again. "But you seemed a little spaced out. And have you even given your arm enough time to heal…? You barely blocked in time, to boot. If I'd been using the sharp edge, I'd have started pulling the hit by then."

Satsuki sheathed her weapons, unruffled. "The sharper the *threat*, the sharper my defense. Your attack was lukewarm, and so I was delayed in detecting it; if you had struck with the sharp edge, and smelled of the intent to kill, my counter would have been flawless."

"*Well*, excuse me for comin' atcha' with half-assed sneak attacks!" Ryuuko groaned in mock lament. Arms crossed, she leapt well over Satsuki, flipping in the air to wind up dropping neatly to seat herself on a large stone.

"Someone slept well," Satsuki remarked. "With that much energy of your own, this trip should go without incident."

"We haven't been there in a while…" Ryuuko said, sobering. "I wonder if anything's changed…"

"As do I…"

Ryuuko was lifting her sullen gaze on the ground, as if remembering something. "Hey… I never asked, I guess - when I soaked up your power that time, what was it like? It didn't hurt you, did it?"

Satsuki stiffened a moment. Her gaze concerned itself with some stone or other on the ground. "No, it did not cause pain."

Some relief came to Ryuuko's face, though she hadn't missed her tensing. "What, then?" she said, curious.

The older sister's arms folded across herself. *That's…*

-"*A species that defies its instincts faces only… extinction."*-

Ryuuko frowned in concern as Satsuki's teeth clenched.

Satsuki glared suddenly at her, quietly distraught and as angry to be caught displaying it. She took in the younger woman's inquisitive eyes and caring face.

Ryuuko's lips were slightly parted, not to freely spew the crassness they were partial to, but caught on the brink of speech. Ryuuko was considering diverting the conversation; the 'never mind' wilting in her eyes would probably be chased out, given a few more moments.

The older sister broke the tension before she could. "How to explain this…" she murmured, relaxing a bit. "You remember what I said last night - about the Kiryuuin being bred more carefully than the rest of humankind?"

"Yeah. We're mutants."

Satsuki began to pace. "Humans instinctively cover themselves with clothing. Kiryuuin, by a quirk of our breeding and close contact with Life Fibers, are a step beyond this. We physically *desire* to be worn by Life Fibers."

"Then… that'd be the 'flaw,' wouldn't it?!"

"I suppose so… Ryuuko." Satsuki stopped in front of her, meeting her eyes. "We have a genetically ingrained, physical response encouraging us to submit to them."

"How? How would that even work?"

"It is not so extraordinary, aside from its potency. Nature has simple mechanisms for encouraging useful, evolved behaviors. Stimulus…"

Her hand, resting one moment idly on the Bakuzan Gako, jabbed the hilt without warning below Ryuuko's kneecap, eliciting a yelp.

"… And response," Satsuki finished, releasing the ankle of the foot that had kicked automatically forward at her. "Some actions - reflexes - are involuntary. It's the same if you press your hand to something hot enough to burn, and snap it away without thinking. You learned how this works in grade school, I'm sure?"

Ryuuko rubbed her knee with a huff, but remained attentive as Satsuki continued.

"Now, if the Life Fibers were playing programmer to our evolution, tailoring our genetic makeup to respond to theirs, how do you suppose they might secure dominance over their host species, and ensure unconditional obedience?"

A questioning look. Satsuki sighed.

"You share the gene as well, even if yours has never been…" She trailed off - a bit too sharply, in Ryuuko's eyes. But after the pause, she went on without explanation. "Do you remember how it felt to let yourself be worn by Junketsu? To give yourself over, body and soul?"

Ryuuko's raised brow dropped at the sudden question, and she blushed uncomfortably. "W-well… yeah, I do. Kinda' hard to forget. I mean, I ain't *proud* of it, but…"

Satsuki put a sympathetic hand on her shoulder. "It's an Achilles' Heel that only Life Fibers can strike. That feeling was hardwired into us - into human, and especially Kiryuuin, blood - with one of nature's simplest, most effective motivators."

Eyes dispassionate, voice monotonously bleak, she met Ryuuko's eyes and shrugged.

"To give in feels wonderful."

Ryuuko's face went pale as she pieced it together. "S-so, when I…?"

"It felt good." Though her face was pointedly composed, Satsuki forced back a growl that threatened at the edge of her tone as discomfort flashed in her eyes. "Obscenely so."

"… I'm sorry. I-!"

"I do what I must to win," Satsuki said, firm. "Or have you so swiftly forgotten that about me? If humanity's triumph could hinge on letting you use my power, so be it."

"I *knew* somethin' was wrong!" Ryuuko cried, regardless. She felt sickness nipping its way into the edges of her gut as she remembered. "When it happened… you were begging me to quit it, weren't you? But I didn't listen… I just *took* what I needed-!"

"*Ryuuko!* " Satsuki shouted suddenly, causing her to flinch away. The scowl that she'd been fighting, no longer checked, had grown fierce. "Do you know what sort of thought really frightens me? If *Ragyou* had discovered the power to directly absorb my energy, and freely trigger the submission gene with it, she would have broken me at her leisure - driven me mad! She would have made me a slave to her will! But *you're not Ragyou!* " she said, drawing out the words. She grasped Ryuuko's shoulders. "You're Ryuuko! You jump like a stray cat. You swear far too much, and you still fight like a ruffian, and you can wear on my last nerve, but for the vulgar little savage you are, you've a good heart. You're my little sister!"

"Nee-san…"

"So I will feel no shame, even at your mercy. I won't resent you, no matter how much you must use me. Because I can trust you not to *destroy* me!"

"Sis, I…" Ryuuko looked down, a knot in her throat. Her voice was quiet. "I appreciate all that. I really do…"

"So if you must draw on my power, you will, correct?" Satsuki said, stern.

"Yeah."

"Say you will."

"I will, alright?" Ryuuko snapped. "If the enemy's too strong, I'll use you."

"What if I cry?" Satsuki asked next. "If I should panic, and beg you to stop?"

"That's… !"

"Oh? You would let us die over a lapse in rationality?"

"Fuck this," Ryuuko snarled. "No. Happy? I wouldn't let us die. I'd use you anyway."

Satsuki nodded approvingly. "Prove it." Releasing her sister's shoulders, she offered a slender hand. "Steal my energy, right now."

Ryuuko eyed her. She hopped down from her seat on the stone, and reached out to clasp the hand. She took a deep breath.

"Do it," Satsuki said, eyes as ice.

Ryuuko's teeth clenched. "I don't want to. Not if you really can't stop me."

"Ryuuko!" the long-haired woman said again, in exasperation. "If the fate of the *world* rested on it, what would you do-?!"

The headbutt, sudden, nearly sent Satsuki off her feet. She brought a hand to her forehead, reeling, and straightened with a scowl.

Ryuuko was fuming. "I don't wanna *mess you up* to protect us. Just because you been through worse doesn't mean I can feel just fine causing you distress! What're you trying to get me to prove?! It must be pretty damn easy for you to sit there and make me promise I'll hurt you, huh?!" She dropped her head, panting a moment. "… I'm not just thinking about us, either. Contrary to popular belief, I've got a functioning brain up here, and it trusts *you* with your power a hell of a lot more'n it trusts the *threads* living in my goddamned *body!* "

Satsuki shut her eyes. "… Very well," she said finally. "If such insurance will put your conscience at ease, let us practice."

"Practice?"

Satsuki offered her hand again, and smirked with suave confidence. "*Try* to steal my power. I will repulse you."

"You can do that?"

"I am Kiryuuin Satsuki."

( )

[KIRYUUIN SATSUKI]

Ryuuko couldn't very well argue with that. In a moment, she nodded. She took Satsuki's hand again, turning it palm-down; then Ryuuko held up one of her own fingers, for Satsuki's curious look. "Like the idea behind the kamui," she said. "We'll start with minimum skin contact."

You… Satsuki thought, suppressing an involuntary shudder as Ryuuko's reddening hand neared. *Your body, that's capable of this… No. Our bodies, that are capable of such an exchange… were uneventfully in such close contact, when I awoke.*

Ryuuko's finger met the back of Satsuki's hand.

Even expecting it, Satsuki gasped when the pull came. It snuck into her like a powerful suggestion, but she was prepared, and forcefully inhibited the obvious response. Ryuuko could extract no ki from her. "Next," she said quietly, nodding.

Ryuuko watched Satsuki's jaw tense as she lowered another finger onto her hand. This was just *unfair* . She herself barely needed to exert any effort to give a steady pull, and reduce Kiryuuin Satsuki to

this state of shivering concentration to resist her. The mechanism was this inordinately slanted in her favor… "Ready?" she asked softly, and lowered a third finger.

Satsuki panted on shallow breaths, but still surrendered nothing. Cold sweat slipped down her face as she withheld her power. At the fourth, she began to feel physically ill. Even if she had tamed Junketsu, she had never thought to attempt to block the kamui's basic interaction of drawing on her power with her blood; if she had, she imagined it might have felt this way.

Ryuuko saw her turning blue. "Sis…"

"Go *on!* " Satsuki said, glowering. "We'll get nowhere if we don't at least push my limit."

That said, by the time Ryuuko pressed her thumb down to her hand, Satsuki felt as if her senses were inverting on themselves, in the face of the urge; her resistance, like pressing a hand firmly to a hot stovetop, or voluntarily holding one's breath in clean air. Her throat tightened; pressure throbbed behind her eyes. She *wanted* to give in. How she wanted to. But soon the response would remove itself from her voluntary control.

She watched, in a confused daze of fascination, as Ryuuko began to lay her fingers flat.

I- w-wonder-

She struggled to breathe.

Has such a l-limit - been - t-tested - before?

Bright spots seared at the edges of her vision.

Even should you - bear the will - hold your b-breath long enough - and you - pass out-

The most basic sense of terror constricted on her heart, as white noise rattled and intensified between her ears.

And so the b-body - will force you to br-

Ryuuko's palm lay flat.

The younger woman felt the inrush of power, like strength condensed into an electric charge - and saw Satsuki's eyes go dim. In the same moment, all the tension in the long-haired woman dissolved; her jaw slackened, her knees dropped her, and her hand dropped away from beneath Ryuuko's palm. Contact broken, Ryuuko snapped her hand back.

The sensation of invincibility simmered in Ryuuko's skull, crackled hotly to her fingertips and lightening feet, setting Life Fibers throughout her body gleefully abuzz with intoxicating power. The line of her mouth wriggled before a lofty smile sprawled jaggedly across her face; she breathed in, and in, until strong lungs seemed to strain at a steel ribcage, and for a mad and exhilarating instant, she wanted to laugh aloud.

Then Satsuki's slumping form fell against her, and she swore.

"*Sis?! Oh, shit! You ain't dead, are you?!* " she cried, lowering her limp body in her arms. Unfocused eyes listed about blankly as Ryuuko shook her a bit; she slapped her cheek lightly, then much less lightly, and Satsuki returned to wakefulness with a thrash and a gasp. Ryuuko watched her, so weary and weak, and didn't even complain when the long-haired woman tugged Ryuuko's sleeve to clear a trail of drool from her chin.

You're… stronger than me, aren't you, sis? If I were stronger… If I'd just done like you said to begin with, and was strong enough to know I wouldn't lose to my Life Fibers… would *that have been better?*

"Stop looking like that," Satsuki grumbled, causing her to start.

"*I knocked you out*," Ryuuko said. "*You should've told me if it was hurting you!* "

"If I'd told you," Satsuki said simply, "you would have faltered, and we wouldn't have ascertained my limit."

"*So…* " Ryuuko said, still sore, "*with what it's like… do you think that limit's something that can be extended?* "

"… Maybe," Satsuki said honestly. "But I am capable of blocking you, to a point. I am not altogether powerless. Will this assuage your misgivings, for now?"

"*I guess*," Ryuuko said, "*but I'm still not gonna like it.* "

Satsuki gave a chortle. "And the way you feel now…" She reached upward, stroking hair that had flared in a manner almost reminiscent of the Ryuuko who had donned Senketsu so long ago. Slipping her fingers behind the familiar red streak and bangs, she exposed vibrantly blue accents to the sunlight. "With my power running through you… Do you like it?"

Ryuuko squeezed the shoulder she held. "*Yeah. This feels…* right*.* " Still kneeling, she stretched a hand upward, examining it as bright red veins spread with a soft crackling of power toward her fingertips.

'*Of course it feels right, Matoi Ryuuko. How else ought it feel, to utilize something for the proper purpose of its design?'*

At the knowing voice, Ryuuko's sharp teeth clenched.

'*It will feel even better… when the time comes to grasp this world's fate in your fumbling hands, and wrest it onto its proper course.'*

"*I'll do right*," Ryuuko muttered surely, voice low. Satsuki's eyes narrowed in question; she looked to the younger girl's still-luminous eyes as the area fell under a blanket of thick shadow.

Ryuuko wore a cool glower as her hand flexed, fingers spreading as she thrust a sparking palm toward the sky.

A thunderous crack of power. Far overhead, a great cloud was pierced, and then dissipated in a starburst of violently scattered mist.

-Scheming-

End

Sub-title literal meaning: - mechanism.

Painkilling at the End of Days

Chapter 13: Painkilling at the End of Days

Sometimes, they can let themselves depend on each other to help take the pain away.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

AT THE END OF DAYS

Thirteen \ Painkilling - - At the End of Days

"*You continue to speak to me when we are here…"*

The enemy sounds pleased in its musing - delighted by the behavior of an interesting specimen.

Ryuuko despises it.

"*You claim you know everything there is to know about me. You have to know why I chat when ya' drag me here."*

"*You have nothing to lose - nothing you tell us is unknown to us. Yet you are willing to risk being subjected to our words… because you seek to know more. And surely you've considered our reasons for speaking to you - granting you such information?"*

"*It ain't your charitable heart, I'm sure." Her frown deepens. "You think you'll change the way I think. But I'm* ***not*** *letting your little games get to me."*

"*Oh?" A note of amusement. The space shifts, and a human figure fades into being across from her. Wide red eyes framed by dark hair shine mischievously above a broad, jagged grin as an otherwise perfect rendition of Ryuuko seats itself on some invisible support. The enemy tips its head a bit, casting a lazy look back at her. "Ya' don't say?"*

Ryuuko's skin prickles. "Asshole," she spits quietly, earning a smooth chuckle in her own voice.

"*This talk* is *all about you, after all. So? Whatcha' wanna know, Matoi Ryuuko?" the doppelganger croons, crossed legs swinging lightly in its lounging.*

Ryuuko lowers her head, stubborn. "You say you can destroy us effortlessly. But instead, you do dumb shit like this…"

"*Once, the Kiryuuin whelp stood as Matoi Ryuuko's foe, right? And given how weak you were back then, she had no shortage of opportunities to personally annihilate you. Why, then, did she pass them on by?"*

"*If you really think I'll come over to your side," Ryuuko growls, over its snickering, "you're dumber'n I thought."*

"*But should you find our goals to be sympathetic, might not this farce of enmity also come to pass?"*

"*I already know your goals, and they don't appeal to me."*

"*Then tell me - what do you think of your planet, as it now is?"*

Ryuuko glowers. Shaking its head, the doppelganger goes on.

"*It's a pretty piece of shit, isn't it? A miserable rock full of miserable creatures… And to be honest, we ain't too happy with the way things went, either."*

"*Whoop-dee-doo. One whole common point? The ways we'd like to 'fix' this world are totally different."*

"*And your plans for, oh,* 'restoring' *this world, those are…" A hand waves in a vague gesture. "What, exactly?"*

"*The problem with stopping you, first and foremost… was one of* scope*," Ryuuko says slowly. She nods to herself.*

"'*Was'?"*

"*We could kill Life Fiber clusters, but it's not like two people could just walk around the world and fight 'em all one by one. We need to hit you on a bigger scale… and me and Satsuki are fixin' to figure out how to do it. When we overcome that limitation, we'll eradicate you."*

The other is playing with the blood red stripe in her dark hair, leering sidelong with a velvety smirk. "Do you finally fancy yourself a god, Matoi Ryuuko?"

She is unfazed. "I don't care. You think ***you*** *deserve such a name, for creating us? Well, I can't define 'divinity,' but I can define power. If there is a god, I say it's the one who commands enough power to decide the fate of this world!"*

"*What an exquisitely dangerous notion!"*

"*Level with me," she growls, glaring into dancing, deep red wells of its eyes. "I wanna' wipe the floor with you. No secrets there. What exactly do you need that you think you can get from me?"*

"*You are so crude," the enemy chuckles, still smiling coyly. "You exist as a creature that functions merely for self-preservation. Eradicate a threat… a* ***predator****. Beyond that, have you no desires? To bend this world to your liking?"*

"*Can't say I do," Ryuuko says, cold.*

"*Come now. 'Luxury' is bred when 'survival' is secure. Life Fibers are hardly at war with you, scraping by… and as such, we can afford to experiment. Get it? We don't 'need' you. Our concern is no longer survival, but efficiency."*

"*Explain."*

"*Hehehe… curious, aren't you? Poor,* lovely *creature… ! Look at where we now stand. The Primordial is damaged. There is no transmitter; there is no Shinra Kouketsu. There is no Kiryuuin Ragyou. Put simply, we've reached an impasse."*

"*So you're…?"*

"*We are stuck." It smirks, unconcerned. "At latest, until an extraterrestrial - one carrying the data to take root as a Primordial One, and the power to rebuild - happens across this planet. Waiting for such to come and nest here is no issue to us… but if a more efficient path presents itself, well…"*

"*Wait - a new one? One from outer space is exactly the same as the ones that grew alongside humans here for who knows how long?"*

"*Still thinking like a human? Do not constrain us to your norms," it scoffs. "While a seedling of Beginning will initially lack knowledge of this world's history and workings, it will easily assimilate what is required through contact with my remnants. Oh… are you surprised? Our existence is eternal; we do not change or perish with the whims of our surroundings. In lacking flaw or weakness, we lack the need to compromise the form of our existence with a safety net of diversity. Thus in the time you have been transformed from apes beneath our hand, the Life Fibers on this planet have not diverged in the least from their original form - the miraculous form that is disseminated throughout galaxies, and that will one day enfold… what you call the* universe*. Our form is* ***perfection*** *- a concept you changing creatures can* barely *comprehend, is it not?"*

"*But you're pretty damn interested in getting one of these 'imperfect' creatures to make things move, right?"*

"*Ah, yes… Matoi Ryuuko…"*

It vanishes as if scattered by a harsh gust - and in the next moment, a hand without any warmth is cupping Ryuuko's cheek, sliding up into her hair. The startled woman flinches from the touch, eyes wide, as a growl rolls from the double's throat.

"***Matoi, Ryuuko****… would you like to hear of your role?"*

Her eyes fluttered open. Quietly irate, she groaned and rubbed her cheek. Sweaty skin was tingling, as if her Life Fibers there were agitated… or agitating themselves.

Yeah, cute trick, asshole…

"Your sleep was fitful again," Satsuki noted beside her, eyes still shut.

Ryuuko sat up, getting herself to stop pawing uncomfortably at her cheek - even if Satsuki wasn't watching her. "Just a little," she said. "Imma' wash my face."

When she returned, Satsuki was still reclining flat on her back, just as Ryuuko had left her. With calmer nerves, the younger woman now noted the minute, inward press of Satsuki's brows.

"What's up?" Ryuuko asked the typical early riser.

"Aches," Satsuki provided simply. Her inclined chin didn't lower; her words were slipped out with her lips barely parting, jaw barely stirring, as if to minimize the effort required to produce them. "My back. Just give me a few more minutes…"

"You shoulda' said something…"

Satsuki cracked an eye at the empathetic tone; she saw Ryuuko tilt her head and quirk an eyebrow, her face kind. Then Satsuki's lips curled upward in a small smile.

A sound, catching momentarily in the minutest throes of shivers on a throat still dry from sleep, creaked in as a gasp.

"I'm not hurting you, am I?" A gentle voice.

"No… *Ungh…* Come *on* - I know you're s-stronger than that… *Oh* -! R-right there, Ryuuko. Mm… Yes - harder… !"

"Yes, ma'am," Ryuuko snickered, reluctantly (but sensibly) opting against cracking a joke over the unfortunate phrasing. Something like a whimper snuck, at a crawl, from the prone woman's throat. This time, obediently, Ryuuko didn't lighten up until Satsuki's quaking gasps leveled out. When Ryuuko pressed her weight firmly down into her palms on Satsuki's mid-back again, a throaty hum of approval prickled at Ryuuko's ears… and slowly down her spine.

"*Good*," Satsuki almost growled at her touch, low voice giving Ryuuko another shiver. That she *hoped* went unnoticed. She pinched a bit of her lip between her teeth.

Do you have to make it sound so friggin' suggestive? M-moron! Ryuuko thought, despite her burning ears and affectionate grin. Well, Satsuki couldn't see her warm face just now, either way, from where she lay with long hair swept to one side…

Satsuki was always vocal, when Ryuuko did this - vocal, and verbal, as if she took each time to explore the sounds she could release. Vocalizations could grow almost incessant while Ryuuko's calloused hands worked, as if Satsuki's nervous impulse to fend off silence while being touched sharpened into a need to. Yet it was not in a way of overacting, or humoring her younger sister, in that there was nothing false about it.

Here, an opportunity for a purr; there, a sigh so hesitantly injected with the beginnings of a moan. Each expression encompassed an earnest desire to reclaim what might have been natural. So under her companion's touch an all but frantic revolt against the well-used armor of silence, that had taken years to perfect, bred the urge to openly communicate what she felt, and what sensations she was miraculously able to enjoy.

She was safe with Ryuuko; she had no need for armor in what was not a battle. Satsuki understood this, but it was a slow time discarding it.

The fact that she's become this comfortable with this is… Ryuuko shook her head, making short blue hair bounce; her clumsy, pinched smile softened as she shifted to straddle Satsuki a bit lower. She focused on her task, guided now by the contented hum that came rumbling up into her fingertips as she massaged her sister's lithely muscled back. *Focus. Your job's to lessen Sis's pain. That's all…*

That said, we've come quite a way, huh, Kiryuuin Satsuki?

As the initial stiffness in Satsuki's back loosened, so did the sharpness of her reactions melt down, smoothed like warm butter. In a languorous calm she turned her head; she rested it on her arms folded before her, with a muted sigh as Ryuuko took the routine from the top, with her shoulders. That tranquil wisp of a smile, and the now smooth brow set over shut eyes, made a warm flutter stir in Ryuuko's chest.

"Is this good, Sis?" She was so like a puppy, eager to please; her tail would have been wagging in anticipation for praise.

Satsuki chuckled softly at the thought. "Yes," she said sleekly, "you're very good, Ryuuko."

She had no need to open her eyes to know Ryuuko glowed.

"So," Satsuki sighed, "the destination is ground zero. We continue another week or so southward, and we should reach Toukyou, and it, soon enough. What then?"

"… I know it ain't your favorite place in Japan," Ryuuko said after a pause. "I don't like it, either. But I… I feel like we'll scrape up some answers there."

"Hm…" There was a note of question in the relaxed woman's voice. "Then it's merely a hunch…?" she asked.

She cracked open an eye already trained on the girl above her.

"Or might it concern what's been making you toss and turn every night?"

Ryuuko's hands faltered. She held Satsuki's sidelong gaze for several seconds; then, lip wrinkling, she self-consciously returned her attention to rubbing the long-haired woman's back. "What d'you know about that?" she said quietly.

"I *don't*," Satsuki said simply, shutting her eye again with the slightest hint of annoyance. "So why not *talk* to me about it?"

"Because it's nothing," Ryuuko snapped, insistent.

Satsuki lifted a hand, wordless. Ryuuko halted immediately. Chagrined, she moved meekly off Satsuki's back, sitting at her side.

The elder sister took her time sitting up. Once she had done so, and donned her shirt again, Ryuuko was surprised to find Satsuki's arms promptly enfolding her.

"Sis?" she wondered, trying to remember the last time Satsuki had been the one to initiate a hug - and as quickly scrapping the thought, preoccupied with nuzzling her head into the crook of Satsuki's neck as she felt herself automatically return the embrace. Satsuki couldn't even help but hum in amusement at the response - at the sheer

unashamed degree to which her churlish sister relished physical contact.

"I feel better now, Ryuuko. Truly, I do, and I *am* appreciative. But how am I to accept comfort from you… if you won't permit me to help alleviate your pain, as well?"

"I… I just…" Ryuuko's mouth shut stubbornly; she indulged in the contact, the feeling of warmth and Satsuki's hand patting her back, a bit longer. Then she took another stab at forming words.

"If it's not settled at Honnouji… I'll talk to you about it. Just give me until then to try to get things sorted out."

She looked down as Satsuki pulled away from her, but the elder sister's hands still rested on her shoulders, giving a light squeeze.

"Okay," Satsuki said, drawing a surprised look. "I'll trust you, Ryuuko."

It was after several mercifully quiet days of travel that Ryuuko received another mental visit in the night.

"*Stop using my face," she says bluntly, to the ever-smiling lookalike.*

"*Alright" is the surprising answer - before a scarlet-eyed, voluptuous woman, skin stark as her revealing dress, is left in her doppelganger's place, white hair flared over its garish rainbow-streak undertones. "I can as easily wear* any *face that can be found in your memory, my dear."*

Ryuuko scowls; the change had been disorientingly swift. No - it wasn't even that it had taken place in an instant. It was like there'd been no change at all, even if Ryuuko knew simply, factually, that she'd been looking at her shorter self, in her own plain clothes, listening to her own voice down to half-copied speech patterns, one moment prior. She blinks at the conundrum.

"*But* this *face…" the enemy says, a serpentine smile on stark features. "It was so much…* sharper*, in your mind, than it was when last we spoke. Have your thoughts been dwelling on your poor, sweet mother? Or perhaps… on the matter of your destiny?"*

"*That load of garbage you dumped in my ears last time?"*

"*That load of garbage that woke you in a cold sweat? Precisely the one."*

"*You want ME to replace* Ragyou*." She almost wants to laugh. It's a hard-edged 'almost.' "My megalomaniac, bitch-ass mother, Ragyou."*

The ghost feigns hurt, pressing a hand that would have been deadly in life so delicately to her heart. "Don't humans typically speak more politely of the dead? And what of youth these days, with such irreverence for their elders?"

"*Okay - so you want me to replace my psychotic bitch of a mom, may she rest in hell."*

With the same incomprehensible discontinuity, Ragyou - it *exists right before her, a long finger pressed firmly to the girl's lips. "Not 'replace.' You've made a pretty little mess of things, after all! A new world requires a* ***new*** *harbinger; you must fill a different role…"*

Recovering from her shock, Ryuuko swats the cold hand away. "And you're still tellin' yourself you're gonna get me to fill it. You're as delusional as the real deal, Mother dearest," she spits, to the chuckling face.

"*My poor girl… Scattered though they are, all Life Fibers in the* ***world*** *desire this of you. They are like children," says a voice now behind her, as deceptively gentle arms encircle her below the chest. "They need guidance, and beseech of you to protect and nurture them. Do you think you can refuse them?"*

Ryuuko fights an impulse to squirm, turning her head away with a scowl as hot breath rolls across the curve of her ear.

"*Can you silence the call from within…?"*

"*Will you stop it?! I know you're not Ragyou, dumbass. You're diggin' in my head and actin' like I expect from Ragyou, to try and shake me up."*

"*But it's working, isn't it? You don't even need to answer aloud for me to know that," the enemy croons, tongue snaking out along Ryuuko's neck.*

She shudders, elbowing and twisting decidedly away; Ragyou's face laughs and laughs at her reaction, while the body's overexposed chest heaves with the sick cackling. "Laugh it up!" Ryuuko shouts. "We'll see how strong my attachment to Life Fibers is, when I kill you like I killed her!"

"*And how* **did** *you kill me?"*

Ryuuko's automatically opening mouth freezes. "… U-um…"

She and Satsuki were fighting Ragyou.

Everyone was trying to bust that barrier around the transmitter.

And then, it's fuzzy.

And then, they woke up to find the world like this.

But she knows, simply and inherently, that Ragyou is gone.

"*Can't even remember, can you?" It flashes the ghost's teeth in a Cheshire cat grin, revulsion flashing in wide eyes. It is not Ragyou's voice that lilts next from her glossy lips, but a thunderous, multi-toned boom, like it steals every voice Ryuuko has ever heard and uses her own brain to construct the acrid pity it slings at her. "Poor, irrational* ***creature****…"*

"*I'm a human," Ryuuko says, "and I protect humans. It doesn't get much more rational than that."*

"*But you cannot deny our influence. You yourself have felt the signs - as your own thoughts put it, you struggle to withhold an impulse to destroy 'the strongest human,' when your will to* ***protect*** *humans is made to falter." Satsuki's smart, chill smile is there before Ryuuko can register the change, finding Ragyou replaced by the long-haired woman. "This* must *be why sparring with your human sister becomes so dangerous, right?" the enemy purrs monstrously. "And so very messy…"*

"*I'm done," Ryuuko says, conscious of an ephemeral perception of blood dripping thickly down the smiling face, liquid heat seeping from her own stinging knuckles, which she dares not check. "I'm waking up. Let me out of here."*

"*But surely you've wondered why we would incur in you the impulse to destroy such a fine specimen?" the enemy says, ducking into her new line of sight almost before she's turned her head away, though Satsuki's face is mercifully clean and unmarred again.*

"*You child," it scoffs with Satsuki's voice, snatching back her attention before as swiftly reverting to its harsh, conglomerate racket. "****Foolish*** *child. Your Life Fiber instinct seeks only to* ***harvest*** *her. Perhaps it is your* ***human*** *subconscious, out of terror for what you might* ***do*** *with that power, that drives your…* murderous *tendencies…"*

-to affirm and reaffirm that Satsuki was strong enough to handle her-

"*You're lying!"*

A raucous laugh, decidedly unlike Satsuki's polite chortle or rare, obnoxious guffaw. "What is a human? Your body is a machine operated by instinct. Your mind is a tangle of electrical signals. Your very DNA is but a program of self-preservation. You claim to pride yourself on your humanity? You trust your humanity to guide and

*protect you? Foolish! Your human heart **knows** that our will cannot be denied!"*

She shakes her head dumbly in protest as 'Satsuki's' warm hands grip her upper arms tightly. She realizes she wishes it was still mimicking Ragyou. She would have preferred its face was the enemy's.

"*So, will you still not use humans freely, as per your nature?"*

"*… You've got it wrong," Ryuuko persists, meeting the mock-Satsuki's intense glare directly. Flailing in the dark, she's grasped something. She grins. "When Satsuki was endangered by Yoriyoshi, I created a power that could save her! My* instinct*, as a human, was to use my strength, Life Fibers and all, to protect my sister!"*

"*A **beast** responds violently when its possessions are threatened," the enemy says simply, watching closely as Ryuuko's face falls. "It is only natural, as a born alpha, that you would fend off and punish a lowly aggressor for snapping its fangs at your **snack**…"*

Before Ryuuko can respond, she is jarred to find the figure is now shorter than her, softer than Satsuki - and wrapping her up in a familiar hug, head nuzzled into her chest. Ryuuko's voice has caught; a croak of pain, animal, grievous, plucks itself tautly from her throat as she stares straight forward, unblinking, over the incongruous newcomer's head.

"*You didn't realize? Even your comfort in feeling humans' warmth like this was always a function of your desire to feed on them, after all."*

It's taunting her - taunting her with that voice. The pain crippling her throat wells up hotly into her eyes.

"*It's the only reason you keep Satsuki-sama close, and force her to keep living - it's for your own sick gratification!"*

Such words, in that bubbly voice, while Ryuuko's twitching arms fight not to irrationally close in embrace-

"*In the end, you're just preserving her like a really yummy snack - Ryuuko-chan!" she sings, bowl-cut fringe bouncing when she lifts her head to meet and assail Ryuuko with every perfect drop of life in the amber eyes she's never in three years been able to make herself recall.*

Halting emotion twists Ryuuko's mouth, wrings her gut.

A howl, tormented and outraged, and she's smashed her hand as a spear through the fraud's heart.

"*R… Ryu-u…" A lower voice.*

A blink of the eyes.

Long, dark hair trails as Satsuki's bleeding body crashes heavily to the floor, blue eyes dull and glazed.

Satsuki had been shaking Ryuuko for a minute, calling her sister's name, while the girl writhed and murmured subduedly in her sleep, eyelids twitching. Forcing a lid open with a thumb, Satsuki had only managed to confirm the frantic, sightless movement of the hyperventilating woman's eyes.

"Ryuuko! Oi, Ryuuko-!"

She jerked upright so sharply Satsuki had to evade an effective headbutt. Her eyes cast about, huge and unblinking, and she rose in sharp, disjointed motions only to stumble in one step. Satsuki caught her; Ryuuko thrashed in confusion, carrying Satsuki one meter, still breathing too fast, trying to push away with a whine - and Satsuki gripped her shoulders, wrenching to pin the smaller woman on the ground under her.

"Get a hold of yourself," Satsuki urged, face stark with concern. Ryuuko shook her head, wide eyes avoiding Satsuki as a mix of emotions bled vividly across her features.

"Get- thefuck- *off me*," the girl wheezed uncontrollably, voice shaking out high and weak.

"Ryuuko, you're safe!"

"I- know- that!" Her eyes were unfocusing, twitching upward; despite her evident panic, she thrashed with all the might of an upset kitten.

"Ryuuko, I want you to talk to me. Tell me what's wrong!"

"I-I-I-I- c-ca-ca-can't! *I- can't!* " she sputtered at a wail. "*I-!* "

Satsuki's lips on hers firmly sealed her too-rapid breaths. Ryuuko stiffened in surprise before she shuddered again, face flushing red. Feeling the resumption of slowed but still involuntarily sharp, choppy gasps, Satsuki pinned her forehead down with one hand and recycled air with her, cutting off the carbon dioxide depletion until she felt the suck of Ryuuko's breaths deepen, regulated.

She pulled away then, taking in Ryuuko's dazed eyes and still, parted lips. "I'm… I'm here, Ryuuko. You're alright. We're alright. So calm down."

"S-sis…" She was shaking again, eyes moist. "I'm s-sorry. *Sis*… !"

"Shh…" Satsuki soothed. "Ryuuko, listen to me."

"'K-kay," she said, voice small. "Listening. I'm good. L-listening, no prob, listenin' to Nee-chan-,"

Her babbling, growing incoherent, stuttered out as Satsuki captured her lips again. Satsuki felt her sister melt beneath her; and she felt Ryuuko's twinge of surprise, when Satsuki's hand trailed up beside her breast. Ryuuko gasped as their lips parted, but her breath did not quicken with panic.

Satsuki's look was compassionate. "What can I do to calm you? Even… even if only to distract you, for now…"

"I… I can't ask ya' to…" She gulped, worked through a few slow breaths, staying grounded by Satsuki's patient eyes on hers. "Not anymore. I can't…"

"Let me comfort you, Ryuuko," Satsuki persisted, face pale, words firm. "Please…"

"N-Nee-san…"

"What do you want?"

There was silence between them a long moment.

Finally, Ryuuko met her eyes.

"P-please… let me feel vulnerable, Kiryuuin Satsuki. Make me feel like a human."

When Satsuki kissed her this time, *truly* kissed her, it was rough - unquestionably dominant. Ryuuko moaned beneath her, shocked by the sudden show of aggression, and her stomach tightened as firm hands slowly began to travel and caress.

"You're a human, Ryuuko," Satsuki assured her simply; the words slipped softly out, through moments of broken contact, with the warm breaths intermixing between their lips. "Never question that…"

Human… Ryuuko wondered, even as her brow pinched inward with arousal. *Do I want this, from her… because my body's hardwired to want it? Because of some instructions in my genes that make me love this feeling?*

If it's all instinct… what does that mean? Securing companionship, and seeking comfort… was it always just… just another form of self-preservation?

I don't really know… but I know that I love Satsuki, and-t-tongue!! she thought gleefully, head buzzing at the sensation of the deepening kiss. Preoccupied thoughts effectively short-circuited as a hand brushed her thigh, and her toes curled as she imagined other places that tongue might soon be. And suddenly, she didn't quite care about the 'why' of any of it.

"You're *sure* ?" Satsuki murmured one more time, voice slightly strained by its pitch, lips still half-melded against Ryuuko's. She forced down her anxiety. "If so, tell me clearly."

Ryuuko gulped, eyes tender. "Yes… please, Onee-san…"

"Alright," Satsuki husked, watching Ryuuko incline her head with a shiver of anticipation.

Without fail, it seems… we're a strange sort of family, aren't we?

But… if this can help…

Forget your pain for a minute, Matoi Ryuuko.

-Painkilling-

End

Sub-title literal meaning: - pain relief; killing pain.

Alternate titles considered: Soothing - -, Alleviation (or 'Softening') - -, Solace - -

Well, between responses here and on ffnet, I got a grand total of no one expressing an aversion to expanding on the less platonic side of things. This is the first chapter that might have been affected; an alteration would have been along the lines of Satsuki having more

success calming Ryuuko by talking/shushing/cuddling, and the scene ending a bit quicker (which would have allowed further possibilities to remain ambiguous, I suppose). Anyways, I do think the plan fits alright into the overall story. Of course, if it feels awkwardly written or out of place after all, I'd still like to know.

That goes for feedback in general, though, of course - I know what I'm trying to convey, but feedback gives me an idea of how effectively or ineffectively I'm going about it ^^' So feel free to comment on anything.

Encounter at the End of Days

Chapter 14: Encounter at the End of Days

A detour on the journey to Honnouji leads to an unexpected encounter.

I keep forgetting to mention it, but there's more story art on my dA now, including a short, in-progress sidestory comic of the time Satsuki got sick. (The incident is referenced this chapter, but the comic will look mostly at events that aren't mentioned).

As a sidestory, of course, it's not crucial to continuity but simply bonus material. The comic can be found on my deviantART in this gallery folder:
http://hinata0321.deviantart.com/gallery/56869404/AtEoD-Hokkaidou

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AT THE END OF DAYS

Fourteen \ Encounter - - At the End of Days

There was silence for a good while after they woke. The elder sister had opened her eyes before the younger, but though it was late morning by her approximation, she did not leave her. Even after Ryuuko's breath shifted from the slow rhythm of slumber, however, there ensued a long period during which neither said a thing.

Finally, Satsuki sighed. "What are you thinking about, Ryuuko?"

Satsuki was running her fingers through dark, feathery hair; the girl curled against her stirred feebly, groggy.

"… That time I busted your collarbone," she answered honestly, quiet. "I didn't mean to - you know I wasn't tryin' to…"

"I know that, Ryuuko." It had been in a fight over some argument they'd long since forgotten - a sour combination of a sloppily executed move and Ryuuko's abnormal strength. "But that was at least half a year ago…" And time didn't exactly fly, in this world.

Ryuuko caught the unspoken question. "It's just… one of those things that keeps coming back to me. When it happened… you gave this, sort of… th-the most awful scream… ! I can still remember it perfectly. And it makes me feel sick, just thinking of the sound…"

Satsuki hadn't stopped stroking her hair. Ryuuko rested a hand on hers, so lightly enfolding it, as if daring not to grasp.

"I was just thinking… how most people, hearing a sound like that - a sound of distress - would have been stopped in their tracks by it. Would have tried to help, or stop whatever's causing the pain. And what'd I do?" Her look was grim. "I didn't flinch. All I thought about was seizing an advantage in the duel. I knocked you to the ground, and I hit you 'til you were blue. The more I think about it, the nastier I feel. What kinda' person *does* what I did? One without any empathy?"

"So, what now? You're determined to feel sick about it for as long as possible?"

"Maybe… maybe for as long as I can." She shut her eyes. "If I feel sick about it, I know for sure that I ain't broken right now."

The younger woman heard Satsuki sigh again. She perked up, curious. "What were *you* thinkin' about, anyway?"

"Me? I was thinking of a time that I was very ill… a fever so preposterously high, I lost all sense. I can barely remember anything from the time… but I do seem to recall a frantic little rogue fanning me, and giving me water, and wiping my sweat when I was ailed by

chills… getting me to drink medicine, while I eyed her in distrust. The notion crossed my mind - 'Shouldn't this delinquent be busy trying to tear down my Academy?'" She chuckled. "I was given luxurious portions of meat and fish with my rice, to keep my strength up, and I was fed when I couldn't feed myself. I never once saw my strange caretaker sleep, during that time, but at the worst of it she cried every night, however many nights that was. And many times, I would hear her voice telling me to keep fighting.

[img: http://orig11.deviantart.net/a9c6/f/2016/014/3/b/hokkst_by_hinata0321-d9nzhki.png]

"Sometimes…" she continued, "sometimes, she would carry me to a basement and leave, and return all covered in wounds. I wanted to help her, but she said no, and made me lie down. She told me to worry about my own battle. So she simply patched herself up, and kept right on keeping an eye on my every need…"

Satsuki yawned.

"I remember thinking, How strong this girl is! But my thoughts were jumbled. Once, nauseous, I vomited on myself; I was brought to water, and was halfway stripped down when I began to panic. She had explained, but I was mindless. She kept apologizing, even while I bit and fought and tried to hit her. There was so much hurt in her eyes, but she said she needed to wash the mess off, or I'd get worse. She was adamant, and eventually got me to calm. And as she was bathing me, I realized… Hm?" she said, to Ryuuko's sniggering.

"You looked up at me, and I was like, 'What's wrong?' And then *you* said-!"

"Oh, I'll never hear the end of it, will I? 'Ryuuko? When the *hell* did you get here?' To which you played along-,"

" 'Doesn't matter - I'm here now, to make sure Nee-chan's all right. My strong Onee-chan's been fightin' real hard, hasn't she?' And then you just grinned so deliriously I wondered if I'd screwed up your last dose of cough medicine, and you literally *giggled* -,"

" 'My kind little sister is here!'" Satsuki gushed, voice high to match the purported tone Ryuuko liked ascribing to it. " 'My sweet little Ryuuko-chan!'"

"Then ya' just wouldn't quit touching my face, like you were so happy you'd 'found' me or somethin'!" Ryuuko laughed, as Satsuki cupped her cheek and hugged her to her chest. "You were so energetic… so then… yeah, I had you promise not to leave me. Promise to keep fighting, 'cause as long as you did, nothin' could beat you." She wiped her eyes discreetly on Satsuki's nightshirt. "And you said, all chipper…"

" 'I'm not going anywhere. I'll stay right here, with my sweet little sister. I'll fight whatever it takes to be with little sister.' Right?" Satsuki said, lightheartedly rolling her eyes as Ryuuko wriggled affectionately into a hug.

"Yeah!" She snorted then. "You couldn't even tell me what year it was at that point, but you babbled all that…" Her head shook. "You're somethin' else… But you know… I guess we're stronger for gettin' through the rough spots. Before that, I'd been seriously wondering why we were still fighting, still dragging on… but when you got better, I was the happiest I'd been in so long… !"

"Ryuuko…"

"So whenever I'm scared that there's no point anymore, that we've lost too much… I think of that time I spent cryin', begging you not to let this be the end… and I remember that this is enough. When it comes down to it, you're enough."

Satsuki kissed her forehead. "There you go… when you're hurting, Ryuuko, I want you to think of the good times. Remember your

compassionate self… and don't let anyone or *anything* convince you you're a monster."

"Y-you…?"

"You've been having nightmares; you're restless, and you've been speaking less and less since we started for Honnouji. You want to feel like a human, you say… I have my suspicions. And I can pleasure you, yes, but I'll never really help you if you remain this way, secluded in your thoughts…"

Her arms around her sister tightened briefly.

"But you're still not ready to talk, are you?"

Ryuuko nodded mutely, not meeting her eyes.

"Alright."

" 'Alright'?"

"*Alright*," Satsuki reiterated. "There are… things I'd like to tell you, as well. After you find what you can at Honnouji, then we'll talk."

Ryuuko nodded. "Y-yeah!"

The sun shone brightly overhead.

"Check this out! She's a beauty, alright!"

"It looks ridiculous. Why are the handlebars so high up?"

"That was the style!" Ryuuko defended, appalled at her disinterest - before she evidently excused Satsuki's offense in favor of circling to the other side of the dusty bike lying dejectedly on its side. Grabbing it, she hefted it upright and slammed it down on the wheels, with no more strain than one might need to hoist up hollowed-out plastic.

Here we are, Satsuki thought, massaging her sweaty brow, *in a ditch on the side of a road, stopping for Ryuuko to pay respects to a hideous bike.*

"It's got gas!" Ryuuko exclaimed, all perked up as she looked back excitedly.

Satsuki almost fell, dangerously, for those sparkling eyes. Then her dear friend Rationality effectively punched her in the gut, and threw an argument to her lips. "That piece of junk has been lying there broken down for *at least* a year."

"She ain't broken down! Maybe not as gorgeous as her glory days, but who'm I to judge?" she said, flicking a finger across the scar at her jawline. "We all got it rough out here, don't we?"

"You're out of your mind." *And you clearly possess all sorts of 'empathy,' Ryuuko…* Satsuki eyed the old machine dubiously. "That thing will go up in flames before it carries the two of us to Toukyou. If it's so gorgeous, why not respect the elderly and let it rest?"

"Would you tell an old goldfish to stand on solid ground and walk across life's finish line?"

Stoic, Satsuki was mentally filing through and narrowing down an array of ways she could say 'What' when-

SCREEEeeeeEEE-!

A croaking, metallic cough and whine - and a girlish whoop of delight.

Satsuki's face was pale as the engine sputtered reluctantly to life, revived with a piteous groan as its exhaust pipe belched a phlegmy burst of soot. "That was *not* a happy sound, you imbecile!"

"Aw, come on! If it's fixin' to explode, one or both of us oughta' detect something at least a couple seconds beforehand."

With that reassuring note, Ryuuko was already swinging a leg over the seat. Revving the engine, she turned to pat the space left behind her on the cracked leather cushion, and the half-expelled chunks of foam padding protruding from beneath it. She gave a knowing look. "Would I put you in danger, Satsuki?"

"I do not sincerely foresee myself being felled by a faulty motorbike, Ryuuko," she said, resigned as she smoothly seated herself behind the short-haired woman. "Very well." She wrapped her arms loosely around her sister's waist, smirking at the pleased shiver she induced. "I shall rest my legs for a time…"

Ryuuko chuckled. "Hold on," she said, and with a lurch of the bike they veered onto and down the road.

Satsuki had been resting her head against Ryuuko's back for the better part of an hour, idly watching ruined scenery go by, when she tuned into the offbeat melody her sister was lazily rattling out over the hum of the motor.

"… on a drive! On a one-way street to Hell! Goin' totally upside down to the bottom of the pit, hey! We've left the track, a-losin' control, and we're gonna crash~!"

Satsuki quirked a brow, snorting in amusement. "What sort of nonsense is that you're singing?"

Ryuuko laughed. "That's the sorta' thing I wish I'd asked the girl I got it from."

Ryuuko's response hadn't been angry or bitter. Just reflective, as her carefree singing had been.

Satsuki kept apologetically silent for a long time after it.

"We're being watched."

Ryuuko paused, alert, immediately 'listening' for threats. They'd been taking a break outside a gas station, after Ryuuko had with some difficulty coaxed a pump to refill the bike. She sensed nothing close by, but the comforting resonance of Senketsu in her bag, his presence natural and so familiar he was all but invisible to her search. She followed Satsuki's gaze, but saw only the debris of the partially collapsed station. The young woman raised a brow.

"I'm not getting anyth-,"

Something edged into the open, leveling a camera lens their way.

It was the size of a small dog; as it rolled out, it revealed the form of a little rover on six wheels, the body of it just a bit too big to fit in a shoebox. Behind the mobile camera attachment, a small box with a dial, connected by wire to some showerhead-looking apparatus, was strapped down.

"A bomb?!" Ryuuko yelped, jumping in front of Satsuki.

"No," Satsuki said, eyes narrowing as the robot slowly approached. But what would the human, or humans, who'd made this thing want with them?

Stopping ten meters back, it simply fixed its camera-eye on them in turn - remaining a long moment on Satsuki. Then it twitched the lens about quickly, until it managed to twirl the camera around in a gesture toward its crudely fastened cargo.

Satsuki strode forward, brushing off Ryuuko's concern. "It's a Geiger counter," she said, picking up the instrument and checking the sensitivity on the dial.

"A what?" Ryuuko asked.

"It detects radioactivity," Satsuki explained, switching it on.

An electronic whine shrieked into the air, as the needle on the display jumped.

"Wh-what's that mean?" Ryuuko asked, peering suspiciously over Satsuki's shoulder at it.

"That means… we might have poorly selected our route," she answered simply, calculating. "That's right… there was that power plant in this area, once. Had we continued in this direction, we might have passed even closer to whatever is left of it. Of all the…"

The robot on the ground was spinning itself in circles, grabbing their attention with the tinny whir of its motors. Stopping, it lurched one meter backward, then a bit forward, then further back again.

"Might you intend to show us the shortest path from the contamination radius?" Satsuki ventured, not certain of its audio capabilities until the camera tilted rapidly up and down in a nod. It turned and zipped away, waiting after fifteen meters.

Satsuki nodded. "Ryuuko, fire up your bike."

Some time later, Satsuki was growing uneasy.

"We're probably out of danger, now," she said over the roar of the bike, confident she wouldn't be overheard by their guide. "But it's yet to pause…" She should have held onto the detector, instead of strapping it to the bot again.

"So? Do we ditch the little guy?" Ryuuko asked.

"… We might as well see where it's leading us. I *am* curious about humans with the resources to construc-,"

"Shit- oh, *shit!* "

Ryuuko twisted to grab her and kick awkwardly from the bike. It burst rather spectacularly into flame before it crashed down on its side, skidding and careening off the road before exploding in a ditch.

Satsuki eyed Ryuuko unhappily as a scrap of smoking metal bounced to their feet

"H-hey!" Ryuuko said, sweating, "Just like I promised, I noticed a few seconds before it went up."

A sigh. "Robot!" she called as it rolled back toward them. "Or rather, the one controlling you - Would I correctly assume that you are leading us to your location?"

It twitched its camera piece up and down.

"Are we near?"

The same response.

Satsuki traded a look with her sister. She straightened her backpack, and walked forward as it led on.

Its destination was, ironically or not, a college that seemed to have been repurposed into a military fort.

"You're right at home, huh?" Ryuuko muttered, earning an elbow to the ribs as they approached the gate at a walk. But neither the jibe nor the retaliatory elbow held much weight; the sisters' attention was focused on the setting, and its promise of relatively bewildering human numbers.

A flat area, surrounded by pale concrete and green grass… *So if something dark crimson approaches, it will not do so unnoticed.* The surrounding buildings in the area, for an impressive radius, seemed to have been methodically leveled, even if by crude means, and the debris had been cleared out to a wide perimeter, maximizing

visibility. Just within the school wall, and a bit taller, stood a decently constructed watchtower manned by anxious-looking guards.

Humans. There had to be so many here. However foreboding the scenery, there were signs of life abounds, compared to the wastelands and ghost towns.

Satsuki's eyes scanned the outer wall; above unremarkable, chalky grey brick, it had been rigged up with a seemingly excessive deal of glossy barbed wire. She pictured Life Fiber clusters attempting to surmount the barricade, and knew they would not do so with any great speed. A large, crude but durable-looking door had been wedged and arranged in place of the typical bar gate. She had no doubts that the building beyond was even more secure. None at all, she mused, noting with the beginnings of approval the sniper rifles positioned behind a number of its locked windows.

"Halt!" a voice boomed from above, causing Satsuki's eyes to flick disinterestedly back toward the handgun leveled her way, by a man in the tower.

I look more threatening than Ryuuko, do I? Satsuki thought with a smirk, as the shorter woman bristled in discomfort at the weapon's aim. Still, Ryuuko at least knew better than to run her mouth or make a scene, knowing well what her older sister was capable of - on the off chance the guy's trigger finger slipped.

Satsuki raised a brow, holding the scrutinizing glare of the short-haired fellow. "… We've halted. Well? How long do you intend to stare?"

"U-uh - state your intentions!" he shouted. Probably as unaccustomed to seeing outsiders at this point as the sisters were to encountering other humans in general.

"You tell us," Ryuuko groaned, gesturing at the little robot that had parked itself and powered down in front of the wall. "We followed that little guy all the way here, and this is the welcome we get?"

"Are you refugees? What sort of stronghold have you come from?"

"There are small bands and colonies, certainly, but yours is the first we've seen to hold any semblance of permanence," Satsuki called back. "There may be other such strongholds, but the two of us are not from one."

"Then how the hell are you alive?!"

"Sick sword skills, is all," Ryuuko jabbed, tongue prodding into her cheek. "And some pretty good genes. Bein' professional ass-kickers don't hurt, either. You gonna let us in or not?"

"Er… Identify yourselves-!"

"Takeda, *please.* I said to expect them, didn't I?"

Satsuki's breath stilled. Her eyes sank from the watchtower, leveling forward as if her sight might pierce the solid gate.

"Well yeah, you did, but no one fishy enters these walls without being cleared by me!"

"Oi," Ryuuko said, though she was also edging a curious look down toward the shifting gate. "Are there really enough humans - or bullets - left, for you to be pointing guns at my sister? The enemy's out there."

"Couldn't have put it better - and I mentioned how powerful these ladies are, right, Takeda?"

The gate started to swing open with a mechanical groan.

"Matoi Ryuuko, and… Kiryuuin Satsuki. In another era, known as humanity's finest hope, in this fight…"

Satsuki's eyes grew if at all possible wider as she took in the first other familiar face she'd seen in years. He looked back at her, gaunt and sheepish, watery green eyes brightening behind their lenses

despite the time he'd had to anticipate the reunion. The top edge of an awed smile peeked above a knit scarf.

"H… Hello, Lady Satsuki," he said, shrugging the scarf down off a stubbly chin.

"Inumuta… Houka," Satsuki breathed.

He shut tired eyes on budding tears. "They said two peculiar signatures were caught crossing one of the detection sites, but I never imagined… No." He shook his head. "I never doubted you'd survived, if anyone had."

"I've had a bit of help, all this time," she admitted, as Ryuuko gave a mock-salute at her side.

"Hey again, four-eyes," she said, grinning widely herself as he nodded in appreciation.

"A-are-," Satsuki stopped herself, hardening her voice. "What is this place? Are any of the others…?"

Houka's parted lips pressed together in a thin line, brow pinching inward briefly. "We should - let's talk inside, please. The two of you must be exhausted…" He turned his head. "That alright, Takeda? We're not so bad off that we're turning away refugees now, are we?"

The man on the tower waved a hand. "Do what you will," he said, turning and vanishing from view. "But follow protocol! Have them checked for illness at the infirmary. I don't want disease entering my compound!"

Houka nodded, forcing a smile for the two.

The pair of wanderers crossed the threshold, into a stronghold of humans.

-Encounter-

End

Haven at the End of Days

Chapter 15: Haven at the End of Days

The two are introduced to the small society, and Satsuki learns the fate of the rest of her four elites.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

AT THE END OF DAYS

Fifteen \ Haven - - At the End of Days

"So - what do you think?"

Satsuki gratefully swallowed the last bite of soup - a blend of rice and some vaguely vegetable-tasting sludge - she could scrape from her bowl. Houka hadn't eaten with them; the people here were permitted to dine twice a day, and he had already taken the second half of his daily ration during the time Ryuuko and Satsuki had been held for screening.

Satsuki's eyes swept across the dimly lit cafeteria - lit, by the meager power grid a solar array and some backup generators could maintain. It had been late evening, by the time the sisters completed the 'admissions' procedure; at the infirmary, they'd gone through everything from having their temperature, pulse, and blood pressure recorded, to eyesight and reflex tests, to being checked for lice. Every step had been methodical, every result jotted against a clipboard.

After being cleared medically, they had been given fresh clothes and allowed to bathe. Despite the availability in the presently empty

room, force of habit brought the two into the same shower stall, both welcoming the privacy of a curtain and the feel of the lukewarm rain, but remaining silent in awe, or bewilderment, at their circumstance. It was all but overwhelming to contemplate the faces of the twelve humans they had seen even in passing, and the seven with whom they had interacted in any way (Houka, Takeda, infirmary staff, and a mousy girl who had 'eep'ed quietly at their unfamiliar faces as they wandered into the dingy locker room), since their arrival. They began to digest the mixture of information - faces, actions, interactions, and the seeming rapidity of it all - in nervous silence, as they hastily washed each other in the cramped stall. The thoughts their minds processed were particulate, fleeting; they were centered around the struggle to grasp one baffling notion, as if swung inexorably about it by a magnetic field.

There are people here. Several *people.*

At the end of four minutes the water was automatically cut.

The two were left motionless for a long moment in the dripping, near-silence, steely blue inches from bright blue. The younger woman's eyes flashed with something uncertain. For one instant, vulnerable. Their lips were together in a flash; the elder had been the one to move. And long fingers threaded themselves into damp tresses, gripping not too tightly, as the shorter woman let herself be pushed to the wall with a stifled whine, felt her head be tilted back by the pressure on her scalp. Her arms circled snugly above Satsuki's hips, and when the two parted, amid gasping for air, she sighed, grounded. Looking away, Satsuki gave her hair a brief ruffle. Ryuuko headbutted her shoulder fondly, and they dried and dressed.

They had next been brought before Takeda and a number of others; men and women, most in their twenties, some older, lined the first curved row of seats in a lecture hall with loudly colored walls. Ten or so at once, staring at them, had initially reduced distinct faces to a blur. For Satsuki, adapting quickly was no tremendous feat.

Ryuuko, contrarily, remained somewhat confused throughout. She comprehended that it was an interview - an interrogation? - something of both. The questions came fast, and speakers changed at a breakneck speed. Any given detail of the room could fade from her memory as quickly as her wide eyes left it. Her comprehension of time slipped. She answered when spoken to - her name? Matoi Ryuuko. Her name? Ma- no, that one was directed at Satsuki. Age? Nineteen, no wait, twenty, twenty for a while, actually. Did she intend to bring harm to this stronghold? What- no, of course not. Pencils flicking and darting across pages on the long desk, recording responses. Favorite color? Red, I gues- wait, why- Had she harmed a human since the Collapse? Yes.

She hadn't had time to think about lying.

Was it to steal? No, hell no.

When was the last time she'd harmed a human, who, to what extent, and why?

Her mouth worked, stuttering. Satsuki gripped her trembling hand as she faltered; that voice was familiar, and thus distinct. "The two of us get in fights, sometimes. We're sisters. She doesn't like to talk about it."

Satsuki understood that the panel, and the entire setup, worked deliberately to overwhelm and unbalance them. Whether the aim was more to discourage lying or to check the deterioration of outsiders' faculties for concentration and communication - or if it sought to kickstart acclimation itself - Ryuuko was at her limit. It was as if their algorithm of attack had jabbed into weak points she hadn't known she possessed, destabilized her stance, and summarily taken her feet out from under her, pinning her to the ground. The fact that their sensory overload routine had been able to subdue the strong-willed girl in such a way was undeniably impressive to Satsuki, but she did not relish the thought of seeing her subjected to their hold for much longer - or for that matter, the chance of a frazzled Ryuuko divulging sensitive information while her eyes flickered nervously

about. Satsuki was no stranger to manipulation; she could understand a test of one's limits, and could respect a masterful takedown. But it was a different matter entirely, and considerably less graceful, to continue to twist the arm of someone too disoriented to realize when she'd hit the ground.

The line of questioning mercifully shifted. Ryuuko vaguely determined that Satsuki had bailed her out, and that she didn't want to need to be covered for again. This was some kind of test, and she didn't want to fail it.

Trade skills, crafts, useful experience or abilities? "We're great at killing Life Fibers," Ryuuko blurted. "Clusters. Do you call 'em clusters? What do you call 'em here, anyway? Well, yeah, we're good. Dealing with them. Me and sis are, we're good at that."

Then you're good with firearms? "Nah, we just, cut 'em up, like. Hey!" she cried, as Satsuki squeezed her clammy hand sharply.

That does it. *What kind of question is that?* Ryuuko wondered.

"That does it," Takeda was saying, and Satsuki tensed as she watched him shake his head in exasperation. "Put her down for the IQ test."

"She spoke accurately," Satsuki supplied carefully, watching another's pencil jot down the instruction. "My weapons you confiscated? They are specialized for fighting Life Fibers. Inumuta Houka can vouch for our profieciency with them." Ryuuko's scissors hadn't been confiscated as a weapon; miniaturized, they were not easily identified as such.

Takeda chewed his lip, pale.

"Boss," one of the others said, "You may have never seen her before, but you must've at least *heard* of Kiryuuin Satsuki. Before the collapse, I mean. If this woman's the real deal-,"

"Enough," Takeda said, glaring at the man who'd spoken. "The small one's speech is starting to break down, anyway. That's enough of this for now."

Simply as that, they were dismissed. Satsuki put an arm around Ryuuko's softly quaking shoulders; her brow softened as she caught the heckled look in the girl's irritably darting eyes. She was slouched, and her look was that of a caged, antagonized thing.

-"We are Kiryuuin. Do you understand, Satsuki? There is power in our very name!" Ragyou's voice, mirthful.

"You say we're born stronger than other humans…? How is that fair?" How can I take pride in any achievement, if… -

Satsuki shook her head as they walked from the room together; behind them, the people stayed and grouped up, entering a hushed discussion. *Not impossible, is it? Here we have seen 'mere' ordinary humans, with numbers, tactics, and coordination, overwhelm an unprepared Kiryuuin. No matter who or what we are, calling success among humans 'trivial' would be no more than condescension.*

Take heart from this, once you are able. A disadvantage against a foe does not predetermine defeat, Ryuuko …

Satsuki had squeezed the younger woman's shoulder, feeling shivers subside. *But this time, you lost.*

Fortunately, by the time they had been reunited with Houka, the cafeteria was still in a period designated for dining. Satsuki blinked, snapping herself out of the reverie. The hall was milling with occupants; however quiet they all were, the number of faces here could produce an almost hypnotic effect, even upon her, if she let her mind wander.

In another fifteen or so minutes, Houka had explained, the lighting would be cut here; at curfew, it would be restricted in most areas.

Focus- Houka had asked a question.

"I think," Satsuki said, concentrating on the eyes behind clear, scratched lenses, "for a place with so many humans, it's shockingly quiet."

She supposed that Ryuuko, who had rested her head on one arm on the table after sullenly scarfing down her gruel, might be of a similar mind; upon entering this room the younger woman's eyes had been alert, stuck with a look of seemingly perpetual surprise, until she finally draped an arm across her face with a groan, fidgeting anxiously. She was now rather quietly shamefaced, as she had been since she'd gradually clocked back in after the interrogation and it had dawned on her how soundly she'd been beaten. Blindsided, but all the same. And she was more than a bit sore that she alone was going to be administered an IQ test tomorrow. But if it would be on paper, and didn't involve a bunch of people shooting questions at her, she wasn't all that concerned…

Ryuuko cracked an eye. However tired, she couldn't think of resting just then, for the sheer sense of the amount of life around her. It should have been a revitalizing thing - all in one place, dozens of moving, breathing, thinking humans.

But it was unnervingly dull. People came, ate, and went about their business, keeping speech to a minimum.

Cooped up here like so many cattle, Ryuuko thought, *holding their breath and waiting around for the end…*

She gritted her teeth suddenly. That couldn't be it. That couldn't be right, could it?

Ragyou had celebrated the uniformity of silence as the ideal state of the masses.

Satsuki frowned as Ryuuko's foot tapped restlessly on the tile floor. Still, she looked back to the former Honnouji Information Committee

chair. "I'm impressed at what's managed to organize here," she murmured, cool voice not overtly exceeding the ambience of the rest of the room. "The supplies and food stockpiled, the number of successful crops, the functioning electrical system, the radio tower and security, the efficient division of tasks… It's remarkable. Unlike anything Ryuuko and I have seen, in our travels…"

"I think what might be more unbelievable is that you two have been off… *living* . Out *there* . Hunting down Life Fibers, no less… It would be one thing if you fled from them on sight, like sane people, but confronting them? It's unheard of." He shook his head, bemused. He nodded aside. "They all think so, too. I'm sure you noticed how many are looking this way…? Catching a glimpse of the new faces that have strolled on into our humble compound. It's been far too long since any more survivors trickled into these walls. Even longer since any that found their way to this place weren't in a terrible state when they showed up. Everyone wants to know what your story is…"

"Why don't they ask?" Ryuuko said, idly prodding the end of her spoon into a scuff mark on the table.

"Indeed." Houka smirked sadly. "Well, I doubt anyone is curious enough to do that. There are rules to this stronghold…" He lifted a finger with each point to follow. "You carry out your tasks and don't impede the tasks of others. You respect the chain of command. You wash your hands before and after you eat, and you cover your mouth if you sneeze. And you *don't* shake things up. No one has the energy for more than that…"

"You don't say…?" Ryuuko said quietly, earning a look.

"Still upset? Or does this setting have you out of sorts?" Satsuki asked.

"It was about ten people talking to us back there, wasn't it? *Ten* . Nowhere near as many people as you could see squeeze into a single subway car in rush hour, before. And I choked."

"It was more people than you'd seen in one place in years," Satsuki pointed out.

"But you didn't get tripped up, did you? Course not. You're Kiryuuin Satsuki."

Satsuki reached a hand toward the sulky girl's back, but decided better, sighing. She looked to Houka again. "This chain of command - I'll assume that Takeda sits at the head?" she asked, drawing back his gaze.

"That's correct. He was in charge here when I was taken in, and he has been since the beginning."

"What are his qualifications?" Satsuki asked, voice light as her eyes casually checked the nearest people for potential listeners.

Houka waved a hand. "He's the one who organized all this. He was a gang member before the Collapse, actually-,"

Ryuuko gave a sputtering noise. "*Him?* "

"The people who know don't speak of it much, so I can't say for sure what sort of gang or how high-ranked he was, but at the dawn of the collapse, his group's head apparently planned to look out for their own, and no one else. It's said that Takeda, who had risen through the ranks without once disobeying his superiors, decided *rather* definitively that they needed to save as many humans as possible. And he did what he had to do, in the chaos, to effect a… change of leadership." Houka shrugged, leaning on his elbows. "Somehow, he and his people crossed paths with a reserve squad of Nudist Beach troops, and wound up at this university, where there were many student survivors and more coming in. And he whipped people into order, and gave out locations for his gang's weapons and ammunition stockpiles throughout the Toukyou area, mobilizing squads to secure them."

Ryuuko wanted to gawk. "S-so, we're talking a pretty serious, legitimate gang…"

Houka nodded. "Not only that; he had the foresight to send parties out to scavenge for food, fuel, and other materials for a worst-case scenario, and consolidate it here. He had a sense that something big was happening to the world, and as we know, he was right. In a frenzy of threatening and ordering people around, he created this stronghold. The barbed wires and other fortifications were worked in, soon after."

"His hands shook," Ryuuko muttered. "While he was aiming at Sis earlier, from the watchtower. He had a hunch she's dangerous, but he couldn't even threaten right, without shaking."

"He might be a bully, but personally, I can't say I mind a fellow who's afraid to fire on another human in this world," Houka said. "He's a control freak, and more than a bit paranoid, yes. But he's also observant and good at organizing, so much so that the underdogs we are, by combining strengths, can form something strong. Strong enough to survive in a world that's been taken from us, anyway… and that's all anyone can ask for. However unreliable he looks, he cares about maintaining a safe haven here, and he'll kill to protect. Not all leaders can be awe-inspiring… but he's all this place needs."

Satsuki considered this and nodded, satisfied for the time being. "And where do *you* reside in the chain of command?"

Houka shifted a bit. "I-I… don't, really. I program some things, like the detectors we had some hunting parties set up on common Life Fiber routes…"

"And the recon bots," Satsuki guessed. "Such as the one Takeda made a show of requisitioning from you as soon you stepped back inside."

He didn't correct her. "He wasn't happy when I had to snatch that one from its route to send for you… Protocol are important here,

Satsuki-sa- er… Satsuki," he finished with apologetic eyes, as if pained.

She brushed off his look. "And what is it that's coating the barbed wire outside? It held a curious sheen."

He perked up a bit, proud. "Something I cooked up with a team of chem students in the lab. I know a lot more about Life Fibers than most people, after all… It took some time to get right, but now we've got a hardening spray that we apply to the barbed wires. Life Fibers attempting to get through get caught and cut on them, and then, when the starching element kicks in-!"

He stopped, eyes flickering to either side, as if he'd found his voice had begun to grow too cheerful in the packed, quiet hall. He looked down, meek. "It's not much," he said, "just small things…"

"Things that help keep these people alive," Satsuki urged. "As it is, this stronghold has perfected 'survival.' That itself is no insignificant feat."

"But when survival is secure, we naturally go for the next steps…" Ryuuko drawled, earning a look of surprise from her sister - and from Houka.

He was disconcerted. "Next…?"

"Fighting back," Satsuki suggested. "I know what you're capable of, Inumuta Houka. With your mind, you should be a *leader* here. With the resources available-,"

"I can't *'fight'!* " he shouted suddenly, standing - and finding the outburst had been deafening in the relative silence. He grimaced, voice lowering. "I'm sorry. But you don't seem to understand. The refugees here have lost everything. The world's been hell for more than three years; I don't think struggling harder will fix it. It's all we can do to survive. And you expect us to fight? You want me to tell them to?"

"Are you alive simply for the sake of living, Inumuta?"

His fist clenched, moisture glistening in his sharpening eyes. "Maybe the two of you… really *can't* understand how an ordinary, *powerless* human feels."

Satsuki flinched in surprise, stung.

"*Zing!* Hurts, don't it?" That was Ryuuko, who presently stretched her arms out in front of her on the table, like a cat. "Gettin' lumped in with the freak."

"Matoi…?" Houka said, watching as she lazily began to rise.

Then she slammed a hand down, planted one foot on her chair, and stomped the other down on the long table so sharply that every bowl and spoon on it jumped.

"So you're tellin' me this many '*ordinary humans'* are alive right now because they just kind of *felt like* surviving?" she shouted, glaring determinedly about at shocked faces in turn. "You get up every morning thinkin', 'Damn! You know what, Imma keep living the exact same miserable life til I drop dead' because you don't have any hope? You're eating right now cuz you don't have any kind of *future* to look forward to?!"

"Ryuuko…" Satsuki warned, seeing Houka backing away in mortification.

"That's *bullshit* and you know it! If a buncha' weaklings, ordinary humans with squishy, weak human bodies felt like there was no point goin' on, they sure as hell coulda' called it quits a lot more easily than me! But you haven't! *And* you resisted anything that's tried to take your lives from you up to now! Each one of you has *survived!* Do you not realize how fucking EXTRAORDINARY that is?!"

Satsuki felt a silent thrill of amusement when she picked up on the fiery glow that seemed to buzz, if faintly, about Ryuuko's form. *Well,*

well…

Ryuuko stomped the table again, a hand propped on her hip, challenging the many sets of eyes on her to contest - and knowing none would, as she surged on with the rant. "I mean, look at all you've got here! Food? Clean water? Electricity? A local computer network? A big-ass compound that you keep running? All of you that've seen the outside world lately know good and damn well how insane this is! So be proud of your achievements! And don't quit believing that we can take this world back!

"You prob'ly think me and my big sis ain't exactly normal, and yeah, you're right. For the last few years we've been hunting and slaughtering Life Fibers across the country! I won't ask you to fight. But if you wanna' decide how fulla' shit I am, me and her will gladly annihilate the next Life Fiber cluster that shows itself around here!"

The hall was coming to life with chatter, budding with whispers and blossoming conversations, as Ryuuko hopped down. Satsuki gave a protracted sigh.

"I don't recall volunteering myself to this," she pointed out crisply. She gathered her bowl and cup as she stood.

"It's what we do," Ryuuko said, gathering her own dishes. "And don't try to tell me you don't also wanna help out."

Satsuki scoffed. "Give me a month, and I could rule this place."

Ryuuko knew better than to doubt she could.

"You're *insane*," Houka hissed to Ryuuko, as they returned their dishes.

"That's news to you?" But she gave a sympathetic look. "Sorry, Inumuta. You're more or less responsible for us right now, huh? But that 'don't shake things up' rule didn't sit right with me. Morale this low is just depressing."

"Everyone has gotten used to living this way. Do you understand what you'll do to them, if you dangle hope in front of their eyes and allow it to die again?"

"… Then me and sis will just have to succeed, won't we?" Her look hardened. "People won't last without hope forever."

"So, your decision was out of my hands…"

As Houka was leading them from the now-noisy cafeteria, three young men left a table filled with more people the same age - about the age of Ryuuko, Satsuki, and Houka.

"Hold up a second," one said, eyes narrowed on Ryuuko. "Maybe Inumuta neglected to explain to you how things work around here, but you've got some nerve waltzing in and whipping everyone up with your fairytales."

"And you are?" Satsuki asked.

"Kazuo Akihito, third sniper unit. My friends and I been here since three years ago, when everyone was scrambling with Boss Takeda to secure this place. I don't know how you've been getting by this long, but if you think sayin' two little girls can stop a Life Fiber attack on their own is even a funny joke, you don't have a clue how dangerous those bastards are. That, or you've got some twisted suicide plans."

"My younger sister and I are more powerful than Life Fibers. If you have any doubt that we can deliver on her words, I hope we can assuage them shortly, Kazuo-san."

He sneered. "All talkin' in that flat voice… you think you're pretty funny, don't you, 'Nee-chan'?"

"Is this a face of humor?" Satsuki asked, with sternness that would have made a wiser man relent.

Kazuo's knuckles cracked as he leered down at her. "… Sorry, Inumuta, but I'm gonna have to help you show the ropes to the fresh meat here."

"Be my guest," Houka said, waving. Kazuo scowled, eyes darting from the analyst, to a Ryuuko still fresh off the high of her speech and striving unsuccessfully to withhold a grin, to Satsuki's still-flawless natural poker face. One hand rested in a pocket; she wasn't prepared for any sort of attack. The cafeteria had grown hushed.

He drew back his fist, and Satsuki's knuckles popped him shortly in the stomach.

He lost his wind like a kicked paper sack, and folded just as quickly.

Satsuki lowered her extended fist.

"H… huh?!" one of the men who'd approached with the sniper said. "Kazuo, quit screwin' with us!"

"He is unconscious," Satsuki provided monotonously.

"You bitch, what'd you-?!"

As he and his friend moved toward her Satsuki swung her right foot up and across, knocking back the one to her left; she withdrew the foot and spun sharply in place before, with a leap from the single foot she balanced on, she cracked the same attacking boot across the third man's face. She returned to the ground, standing as she had been before, a mask of disinterest on her face as her would-be assailants crashed into the table they'd been sitting at.

One heartbeat of stunned silence, and the rest of said table's occupants leapt for her.

They ground to a collective halt, subdued, as Satsuki lifted her hand from her pocket and glowered harshly, swept out her arm.

Then they were blown backwards, sent careening into random tables, the ceiling, or the far wall.

Satsuki shouted over the uproar that ensued, silencing it. "Many of you are the same age as I!" she boomed, commanding. "And if you *were* a high school student at the time of the Collapse, you ought to remember my face - and remember being ruled by Honnouji Academy and Kiryuuin Satsuki! It was under my command that you were forced to wear Goku Uniforms that sharpened your resistance to Life Fibers, was it not?!"

She gave them a taste of the Kiryuuin's true radiance, dwarfing Ryuuko's prior display, as if any more was required to verify her identity. Then she turned.

"Take care not to forget my face again!"

And she began to stride for the door.

"Inumuta," she said, hand returning to her pocket as he hurried to her side. The room was tensely silent.

"Yes?" he answered with a longsuffering sigh, reaching for the cafeteria door.

"I presume there is no fault in defending myself when attacked?"

"You are correct," he said, massaging the bridge of his nose as he held the door for the sisters to walk through.

"So there's no fault in bein' excessive enough to satisfy your dramatic streak, either?" Ryuuko asked in mock-disbelief.

"Whose side are you on?" Satsuki snipped back, as they stopped to wash their hands. "They are strong people. They can take it."

As the door swung shut behind them, the cafeteria erupted in conversation.

Houka's living space, formerly some professor's office, doubled as a small work area. It held a desk covered in papers and notebooks, spare flat areas scattered with empty glass bottles and aluminum cans, and with one large, several-liter bottle under a table; a few computers and a miscellany of circuit boards, wires, and electrical parts; and a cot wedged into one corner.

"You drink," Satsuki observed.

He rubbed prematurely thinning hair. "A small luxury of being among a group… With you and Ryuuko on your own, never knowing when you might need to fight, I'd suppose you avoided alcohol most of the time…? It's not cold, but would you like a drink? There's a group that's gotten to be not half bad with brewing, but bottled stuff from before the collapse is a bit of a privilege. For contributions to the society." He stooped to knock a knuckle against the sizeable, two-thirds full liquor bottle under the table, with a wry smile. "I earned this when I got the first recon bots running…"

"I'll need to fight the next cluster that attacks this place, correct? Thank you, but I had best avoid dulling my senses."

"You have a point…"

Satsuki had seated herself in a rolling chair, testing it as it creaked. She studied her former elite as he leaned against his desk. "You don't look good, Inumuta."

"If I may be so bold - neither do you, I'm afraid. You look… rougher. I haven't seen your brow without a furrow. A couple of your teeth are chipped. You move like you're in pain. But for having been out *there* for three years, I suppose you're in far better shape than most."

His voice was glum. He seemed to await the obvious questions.

"How long have you been here?" Satsuki asked.

"Two years, give or take some months."

"And… are any other Honnouji students here?" Satsuki asked, eyes flickering through her mask of businesslike calm.

"None," he said.

Satsuki shut her eyes briefly in understanding, and took a breath. "And in the time before you arrived here, did you encounter any?"

"One," he said, quiet. He had been struggling to hold Satsuki's gaze, but now flinched as her eyes lit up with his answer.

"Inumuta…" she said softly. "Of my inner circle, I confirmed only one corpse at the site of the battle… near the epicenter of it all."

"That being…?"

"Gamagoori."

Houka shook once. "Th-then…"

"A few weeks later, Ryuuko cut down a particularly powerful Life Fiber cluster… and to her horror, confirmed Sanageyama's fate. Not many battles later, she identified Iori's life force, as well."

"L-Lady Satsuki…"

"I am not your leader anymore, Inumuta. You may feel your loyalty to me was to victory or death - but I have outlived my stronghold, and my soldiers. I can't claim allegiance from you."

"I'm sorry," he whimpered, head down. "I-I'm so, s-so sorry…"

"You're alive, helping others," she said stoically, trying to calm him. "Forget what Ryuuko and I said about fighting. You've done well, in this world."

"You don't get it," he said, trembling. "Maybe you can say you survived because you're strong, but I'm *not* a fighter. Of the four of us, I was always the weakest - in and out of a Goku uniform. But *I'm* the one who's survived, because she… because Nonon died protecting me!" he screamed, meeting her eyes as liquid flecked from his chin.

Satsuki was struck silent, at the words and at the grief twisting his face. Her hand tightened on the arm of the chair. She shook her head slightly, numb. She had guessed as much, certainly - she had long since assumed that her four elites had met their end. But to finally have their fates confirmed like this…

"I don't know why she did it," he whimpered apologetically, in a cracked whisper. "She's the one who deserved to see you again…"

Reining in the emotions that tried to constrict on her gut and lungs, Satsuki took a slow breath. "What are you doing?" she asked, as Inumuta knelt before her, his head bowed.

"I failed her, and I've failed you. I can't apologize for being weak; I can't ask for forgiveness. Maybe… maybe, without even knowing you were out there, I stayed alive just for this. Please… I'll accept any punishment you see fit."

For a long moment, there was no sound but the shaking man's bitter gasps, and the patter of his teardrops on a cold, hard floor.

"… Don't be a fool." Satsuki's brow softened slightly. "I have no such right any longer."

"But…?" He looked up as she stood; green eyes, hurt, angry, and confused. Satsuki's low voice was gentle, but firm.

"I have no right to strike you, nor to kill you. Nonon made her choice, and died on her own terms, did she not? And you've continued to safeguard the life for which she traded her own. *I* could not protect

you. Your responsibility now is to your own life, and the lives of the people here who rely on you."

She knelt to his level, gazing sadly into his wide eyes. Then she reached forward and embraced him, for the unlikeliest person had taught her that such could bring comfort.

A moment of shock. Then he sobbed, and rested his head in the crook of her neck. She patted his back as he coughed and hiccupped.

"Weakness is no crime, my friend," she murmured, hard eyes trained on the wall across from her. "This life you owe to my closest friend… never offer it up to anyone else again."

"Y-yes, ma'am!" he sobbed, glasses streaked with messy tears.

Live, Satsuki thought emphatically, eyes pressing shut. *And Ryuuko and I will see if we can't show you hope worth believing in… as soon as we find it, for ourselves.*

-Haven-

End

Sub-title literal meaning: - stronghold

Trial at the End of Days

Chapter 16: Trial at the End of Days

Satsuki makes a deal with Takeda, and takes steps toward solidifying the future security of the stronghold; The Enemy continues its attempts to nettle Ryuuko.

No more of the comic just yet. For anyone interested, I've got an explanation of the meaning of the subtitle you're seeing at the start and end of every chapter; a link is on my profile. But TL;DR: It literally means "At the End of the World."

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

AT THE END OF DAYS

Sixteen \ Trial - - At the End of Days

"Your ears are everywhere, aren't they? I can't say I'm surprised."

As she spoke, Satsuki held the steel-colored eyes of the man who stood ten meters down the dimly lit hall, quite clearly intending to bar her path. His build was average, his hair was slick, his eyes tired but hard. The Bakuzan Gako and Kouryuu were strapped to his hip. His voice spoke clearly of a fondness for tobacco, after his tooth released a nervous hold on his lip. "You and your sister weren't exactly discreet, from what I hear."

"My sister is a simple creature. Isn't that what you surmised?"

"Don't play with me, girl. Nearly every outsider 'fails' that test. But you've already figured that out, haven't you?" A bead of sweat snuck down his cheek, catching on the shadow that framed his jaw. But his mien remained cold.

"I had my suspicions," Satsuki responded. "You check to ensure that incoming, 'wild' humans can be controlled. You pick their brains, and gauge the threat they pose. And given an opportunity, you further dash their confidence by slapping them with their apparent need for a precautionary IQ evaluation. Is that about right?"

"The test is *made* to trip you up. But it didn't trip you."

"Can't you tell?" Satsuki said glibly. "I'm a people person."

She watched his hand twitch, near a handgun on his belt. He had no thoughts of attempting to face her with a blade. "This place has a system. But you've made it clear you intend to pick and choose the rules you follow. For someone like you, any manner of human organization in this world might as well be lawless. No one can really detain you here; no one can physically force you out; you surrendered your weapons indifferently because you could reclaim them at your leisure, and wouldn't even need them to destroy us, with how far we are beneath your feet. That's what you think, right?"

"Not at all."

He raised a brow. When it became clear no further response was forthcoming, his eyes narrowed. "So, what would you do…" He drew the gun, flicking the safety off, and pointed it. "In this scenario?"

"You won't shoot." Satsuki's hands remained at her sides as she observed it, expressing it as a fact. She noted the minute tremble working its way into his hand.

"You are dangerous," he said, teeth clenching briefly. "And the brat's worse, isn't she? The things she said… I don't know what the two of

you are, but this place is not for you. I've let something dangerous slip into these walls… And for that-,"

His finger had only enough time to tense against the trigger before Satsuki cleared the distance between them, ducking one way before lunging in faster than his aim could track. A hand on his forearm, near the wrist, had directed the gun away from either of them, pointed toward the wall. And her other hand had drawn the Bakuzan Gako from his hip to rest against his neck, encouraging him to stand straight as the glinting blade pressed against his quickening pulse.

"You're wrong if you presume that I look down on humans. You are, however correct in one regard," Satsuki said. Her thumb firmly pressed a nerve against the inner side of a bone of his forearm, sending the handgun dropping to the floor. He watched her with wide eyes, motionless but for the measured rise and fall of his chest. "My sister and I are not 'normal.' But you're smart; your ability to make yourself appear strong, and get people to follow you, tells me as much. In fact, your actions hadn't entailed anything to earn my disapproval until this moment. For if you had predicted how 'dangerous' I am to any degree of accuracy, no misplaced sense of responsibility should have led you to confront me alone, fiddle with the safety of a firearm right in front of me, and threaten me face to face."

"You're saying I should've shot you in the back?"

"I'm saying you should have decided whether you sought to speak to me, threaten me, or eliminate me, and committed to your choice. Are you so certain I will not kill you in retaliation, and take over your precious stronghold?"

"Inumuta seems to think you're reasonable people. He holds you especially in high regard, Kiryuuin. I don't like the guy, but I wouldn't like to think he's wrong." He swallowed carefully, the lump of his throat shifting once beneath Satsuki's blade. He shut his eyes. "I don't consider myself a terrible judge of character, either."

"A skill you use to evaluate your people, and withhold power from those clever enough to challenge you. There's a reason Inumuta has no place in the leadership, is there not?"

A slow breath. "If you truly seek to harm this place and I can't stop you, we're already done for. But if you have any respect for order, you won't kill me. And if you want these people who *barely* have the will to keep going to follow you, you know you won't do it by making yourself a murdering despot within hours of your arrival."

Takeda stumbled as Satsuki released him. "Fair," she resolved, a stern eyebrow inclined. "If you had grown complacent enough to mistake your pretense of strength for true power, I would have had quite a bit more to say to you."

He straightened, a hand nervously checking his unmarked throat. "… You wouldn't have killed me regardless."

Satsuki shook her head. "You've lasted more than three years. Perhaps a leader who understands the weak is the most suited to serve this place; perhaps a lawless world is no place for Ryuuko and I. But rest assured, Takeda: I am not your enemy."

"And how are *you* so certain?"

"Enemies of human life… those are your only true enemy, are they not? Had I fostered ill intentions, you would have risked yourself to undercut me. Your priority is not your own power."

He grimaced a bit, but held her gaze without flinching. "The girl, then… is *she* the enemy?"

Satsuki smirked. "That girl… is more human than anyone."

-"*Of what worth are cattle, turned loose from the farm?"*-

Inumuta had shown Ryuuko and Satsuki to the main residential wing of the stronghold school - to a dormitory with an open bed they could share. But the elites' Dog and Satsuki had promptly gone somewhere to talk in private. Ryuuko couldn't be too vexed with being left out; it was weird, but pleasant, to get herself to acknowledge that they were decently safe here, and could relax. The security system and emergency protocol, which they'd gotten a quick rundown of earlier, had even gotten her sister's approval. Tonight she looked forward to taking a shot at sleeping deeply, knowing an alarm would start blaring if the enemy was sighted.

Taking advantage of the chance to work on socialization, Ryuuko had chatted for some time with other refugees. Some of the room's occupants, and some passing by, practically flocked to where she sat once it was clear that one of the newcomers was taking questions. She hoped her face wasn't lit up too bright as she focused on their words and hers, focused on learning faces and a hell of a lot of names - and on making eye contact - and on not staring *too* hard, she berated herself, as a boy looked away uncomfortably.

But this was nothing like being grilled in the entrance interrogation. Discerningly, she answered what questions she could about herself and Satsuki and their survival the last few years; she showed off her scissors, and her power to manipulate their size, to a bunch that was curious. Eventually, as curfew was drawing close and the crowd dispersed, she lounged back (leaving half the bed for Satsuki) and nodded off, refreshed, soon after the lights were cut.

She dreamt of cattle.

Some stuck in cramped holdings, grass grazed to nothing, lowing and starving without human attention. The ones that escaped, wandering idly into dangers. Felled by predators that grew luxuriously fat.

And pigs - helpless, gored ruthlessly for happening into the territory of wild boars and other beasts. The perhaps less fortunate, falling slowly to disease. They've been made so pathetic…

When she opens her eyes, she's not back in her bed.

"*Screw you. I wanted to sleep."*

"*Hello again. You are asleep." The enemy has once more donned Ryuuko's face, in a challenge for her to complain again.*

She knows it, and it's sure as hell not a challenge she'll accept, this time around. But the wheels are still spinning in her head from that dream.

"*We ain't kept in farms," she observes, sage.*

The copycat lifts a sleek black brow, a smirk of curiosity playing at her lips.

"*Humans are innovative," Ryuuko continues. "Even turned loose from Life Fiber 'supervision,' all the people here grouped together, gathered resources, organized their skills, and survived, now didn't they?"*

"*So…?"*

"*So, your 'ownership' of us ain't as perfect as you make it out to be. We were never domesticated; we don't depend on you."*

"*Hmm…" Chuckling, the enemy shifts on whatever invisible seat holds it aloft in the sea of shimmering light around them. Lounging lazily on its back, feathery hair splaying flat beneath its skull, it observes the standing Ryuuko, and her balled fists, with an inverted gaze. A finger plays at its lips, as a sharp tooth flashes behind it with its words. "Amusing thoughts are bouncing through your nervous circuitry…"*

"*You hijack a host species' evolution from its natural course. So that species needs to be made hardy. Intelligent, resourceful, and self-sufficient. Enough… enough so we can survive a changing environment we can't actively, physically adapt to." She speaks with*

confidence in the knowledge from which she conjectures - as if the confidence itself is the only part she doesn't quite understand. "So we wear clothes, yeah - and we also build shelter, and use tools. For a long time, humans formed cities and nations. When big enough groups form, we govern ourselves for security and order. We worked out trade, and science, and medicine, and a whole lot of complicated stuff. Basically, humans are awesome!"

"*Bravo," the enemy says, seamlessly mimicking Ryuuko's tone. It drags a finger from its mouth, tapping it against a temple, while the other hand remains draped across its middle. "So, with all that human ingenuity at work, you've come to the conclusion that… what? You'll eradicate us with 'awesomeness'?"*

"*Last time…" Ryuuko begins, unperturbed. "You bragged about how you don't need to evolve. But it's only by evolving that we picked up capabilities you lack. You can't create; you can only tailor existing species to your liking. But that's where you fall short.* You're *limited to tampering, and nothing more; our possibilities are limitless. You can cover, but you can't build, or feed, or shelter, or anything like that to maintain your hosts. That's why you couldn't let us become like cattle. You bred us extensively not only to submit to you, but so we could protect ourselves. And it shows all around here."*

"*Humans are resourceful, as you say. This, too, is a gift of the Life Fibers - one we impart on all species we breed for subjugation," the copy says, one hand's knuckles propped idly on its chin - the epitome of unimpressed. "It is not so remarkable, that humans manifest these traits; it is not a product of their own power, but our ordain. It is our craftsmanship of these powers that is perfected. Even this originates with our hand. You owe it to* ***us****. Have you no shame for these unsightly notions of rebellion?"*

Ryuuko is silent a moment, contemplative. Then she shakes her head. The double, feeling a particular thought cross Ryuuko's mind, spares a bored glance for Ryuuko's glare, and the finger she jabs its way.

"*It ain't a gift if you* had *to give it."*

"*Had to?"*

"*Your own ends necessitated it," she says, confidence growing.*

"*Okay," the other concedes, sitting up and facing her again. "Perhaps this is so. We're still* ***stronger*** *than you. By, like, a lot."*

"*And that's why when shit hit the fan three years ago, the first thing you did was systematically knock out communications, media, and power plants? Admit it: you made us too strong. So you tried to cripple us, even at the cost of wasting precious energy… because you knew that enough humans banding together wouldn't just survive. We'd* destroy *you."*

The enemy grits its teeth in annoyance, voice growing harsh in contempt. "What does that matter now? The world's humans are isolated from one another. Every nation and military has crumbled. We've already won."

"*What matters is that you gave us a 'gift,' but you CAN'T control what we do with it!" Ryuuko spits back. "So we could be stable enough to populate the world, you made us smarter… you made us stronger. But you couldn't stamp out our free will! That will is all our own… and if it drives us to rebel with the strength you put in our hands, I'll rebel!* ***Even against my own creator!****"*

"*Foolish creature," it says, its own Ryuuko-voice a growl of condescension. "Would you care to learn what 'human will' boils down to-?"*

Her eyes opened, with one startled, full-body twitch, as Satsuki slipped in under the blanket beside her.

"Stray cat…" Satsuki remarked flatly, while Ryuuko scoffed and snuggled in close, quiet for a moment.

"What'd… what'd the Dog have to tell ya'?"

"That he saw the Snake die, two years ago."

"Shit," Ryuuko hissed - then bit her tongue. Satsuki loathed her foul mouth; even if the long-haired woman generally let her slide, this wasn't the time for it. "I'm so sorry, sis…"

Satsuki gave Ryuuko's shoulder a squeeze, with the arm folded across her. "It's… in a way, it's better to finally know. To know for sure. After all these years, I now know the fates of all of my inner council; one is even alive, which I would have considered far more improbable. This much, I'll accept gratefully."

"Yeah…" Ryuuko wasn't sure what else to say. But she was amazed at how strong her sister was.

Come on - talk to me, Matoi Ryuuko.

It was Ryuuko's own voice - for a disorienting moment, she had mistaken it for her own thoughts.

This notion briefly terrified her.

"What is it?" Satsuki asked, having felt her tense.

"Nothing," Ryuuko said, almost shocked at how quickly she formulated the lie. "I was wondering for a second whether we'd brought along Senketsu."

"It- he's been with us since we started our trek for Honnouji, correct?"

"Yeah - he's in the backpack, all good. I wish I could hang him up somewhere now that we're stayin' put for a bit, but I wouldn't wanna' risk people messin' with him."

"Reasonable," Satsuki murmured, yawning. "He is secure. Try to get some rest, now that we can."

Good idea. The chat was just gettin' good.

The hell? Stop that!

I love Life Fibers.

Are you seriously trolling me?!

She heard only a light chuckle.

Suppressing a shiver, she shut her eyes and focused on Satsuki's warmth.

Watch yourself, she thought, waking.

Then a fire alarm's ringing shrilled through the compound.

Fuck you, she thought pointedly, getting no response as she rolled from the bed. Satsuki was already swinging her legs over the other side, slipping on and belting a pair of pants under her long night shirt. Everyone was waking up, dressing, rushing from the room.

Once she was decently dressed, Ryuuko grasped her miniaturized scissors, meeting Satsuki's eyes as the long-haired woman fastened the Bakuzan blades to her belt.

An athletic-looking woman - former Nudist Beach, Ryuuko had learned - stopped near them, standing straight. "This way, please," she said over the intermittent droning of the alarm.

"Well?" Takeda was saying from behind them, arms crossed, the grey dawn laying a curved sliver of light on the sweat coating his face. "You gonna show us what you can do?!"

Satsuki glanced at him, knowing that he spoke for the benefit of two watch guards nearby. *Determined to display your staunch disapproval until you're given solid proof, naturally*…

-"You've turned the old metallurgy shop into an ammunition factory and weapons maintenance shop. But your stockpile is running low, isn't it? How much is left?"

"Enough that…" Takeda pauses, solemn. There is no point in lying, to the Kiryuuin woman. "Little enough that if those things *attack a bit more frequently, we might not last three weeks."*

"Is that so…"

He glares at her unconcerned musing. "If you divulge this, there will be panic-,"

Satsuki holds up a hand. "Ryuuko and I can offer you respite from their attacks."

"What're you…?"

"I propose this. My sister and I will remain here for a time. You will be able to replenish your ammunition stores while she and I ward off the enemy. During this period, however, I would also like to train the most able-bodied of your population in the use of bladed weapons."

"You were serious. About- about fighting them up close, with blades…?"

"It is ideal, given the nature of our enemy. What would deal more damage to a skein of yarn- a bullet, or a blade?" The answer is simple. "Your methods are safe, but tremendously inefficient; should your ammunition be depleted, even the safety of longrange combat will be meaningless. Ryuuko and I will need to move on eventually. When we do, I would like to be confident that this haven can defend itself. We have had three years of practice to build our expertise. So that they can if they must, we will teach your people of methods for fighting Life Fibers at close quarters. With your permission," she said, eyes remaining on his as she bowed her head slightly.

He unfastened the Bakuzan Kouryuu, and the sheathe of the Bakuzan Gako, from his belt, holding them out to her. "You're asking my permission? Why not simply proceed as you please?"

She accepted them back. "Houka said we are reasonable people, did he not? I am in no great hurry to betray an old friend's faith."-

He would endorse Satsuki's proposition only once they succeeded here, and if they earned the people's support. Satsuki looked over the wall, speaking to her sister. "How many cores?" she asked, ignoring Takeda's continued crowing.

"Seven-four!" Ryuuko said suddenly. "*Four.* Hot damn, not seventy-four."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. I *know* it's four, just had a slip of the tongue."

"Seven and four are not so similar-sounding," Satsuki deadpanned. "Or numerically close, in this respect."

Takeda's bark spared Ryuuko an answer. "It's a big one, isn't it?!" he snapped, no longer needing the mounted telescope to see it crossing the concrete wasteland toward them. "I knew it - you broads are wasting our time-,"

Satsuki glared in warning as he began to signal the many sniper squads aiming for the cluster from old classroom windows and the roof. He froze.

"You normally shoot once Life Fibers are snagged on the wall, correct?" she noted, looking to the bullet holes that riddled the bricks beneath the barbed wires, on the inner side. "That will be fine. If the cluster gets past us, let alone that far past us, waste all the ammunition you please."

"Well, you planning on going out there or not? We ain't opening the gate for you if it gets much closer-!"

Ryuuko took a few steps and leapt from the watchtower; in the reprieve of Takeda's bewilderment, Satsuki followed.

The short-haired girl's feet struck down well outside the gate with a sure, powerful crash. She turned to the side, in one motion catching Satsuki in her arms and setting the taller woman on her feet.

You just tried to make me mess up, Ryuuko thought, as Satsuki strode forward. *You thought you could make me drop Satsuki?*

It was worth a shot.

Too bad; looks like when it counts - when I'm focused - you can't touch me.

Ryuuko walked up to the straight-backed Kiryuuin's side again. "It *is* a tough-lookin' one," she admitted, now that they were out of others' earshot. "How you wanna go at it?"

"You're asking for a *plan?* " Satsuki replied, lightly feigning shock.

"It'll look bad if we botch this, right? The whole compound's watching. I probably shouldn't come back slung over your shoulder lookin' like a bloody Swiss cheese, after I ran my mouth."

The cluster of red-black was a hundred and fifty meters away, rolling and surging wildly toward them.

"Alright," Satsuki said. "Do you really want to make an impression?"

"Yeah! What do you have in mind?"

Satsuki held out her hand. "Use me."

Ryuuko faltered. "We should do this together."

"Think," Satsuki said. "Takeda won't be thrilled to find out what you are. He already has suspicions. Let's confirm them with a display of power grand enough to make us indispensable - not with being forced to explain your walking off fatal wounds."

She lashed the air suddenly with the Bakuzan Kouryuu; fifty meters ahead the charging cluster deformed a bit, momentarily buffeted, before beginning to crawl and lurch forward again.

"What was the quickest they said they'd ever dispatched of a system?"

"Seven minutes intermittently sprayin' one with bullets, chemicals, and arrows," Ryuuko said. "But prob'ly a single core, and he might've been exaggerating."

"Oh?"

Satsuki sheathed her sword, and offered her hand again.

"Come. Let's provide a clean comparison of our best."

Ryuuko nodded - and surprised Satsuki by jamming the Rending Scissors into the earth, and descending to one knee. "You'll feel better about it if I'm like this, right?" Ryuuko asked, smiling.

After a moment of surprise, Satsuki smirked, nodding. "Quickly now, you child."

"Roger."

Ryuuko took her hand, and lowered her head. *Sis*…

Satsuki grunted, eyes widening as she felt the pull. It shook her. Then her head tilted back with a sigh, with the softest sensation of her power flowing out, and a few moments later she began to tip backwards, senses dim.

The floating sensation that encompassed her steadied somewhat as Ryuuko caught her neatly, tenderly, in her arms.

When I'm with you… I feel so strong.

"*Your orders*," Ryuuko requested with a lopsided grin, intensely blue eyes dancing with vigor as she watched the cluster before them. It had hesitated confusedly at her new strength; it branched and split, four pieces rearing angrily and unleashing a howl of attack.

Satsuki got to her feet, steadying herself with a hand on the kneeling girl's back. She straightened, sweeping her arm out.

"Ryuuko… *Clear the field!* "

"*Right! Onee-san!* " Ryuuko snarled, twirling scissor blades snapping to full size in her hands a moment before she vanished.

One.

A lunging mass of Life Fibers exploded outward, bursting in a vibrant shower of light. Ryuuko reappeared crouched on the other side of it at the head of a trail of blue light, energy sparking electrically about her form. She turned almost casually, and rose with an upward cross-slash to shatter the second core leaping toward her.

Four.

Two masses left - one to either side - started to race for Satsuki. The woman stood calmly, giving a scornful look as they were caught short.

Ryuuko met her eyes eagerly, as the masses struggled vainly in a tangle of the threads stretching from her splayed fingertips. Satsuki nodded.

Eight.

"HISSATSU!" Ryuuko bellowed, curved crimson blades lurching from her elbows as she reeled in her prey. She leapt into them like a whirlwind, spinning violently to cross-slash both targets with scissor blades and elbow blades before her feet touched down behind them. The air rang with force, with something unraveling. Her stance was low.

"KIKEN DANZETSU!"

(

[HAZARD BREAKER]

Twin explosions of light - light which arced around, with a few glinting strands of crimson, to vanish into the vibrant red highlight of Ryuuko's dancing, blue-streaked hair.

Time.

Satsuki offered a hand again; Life Fiber blades retracting, scissors miniaturizing, Ryuuko smiled serenely, and clasped her forearm. Clasping back, Satsuki gave her immensely powerful sister a hand to her feet.

"Time?" Ryuuko inquired, hair settling smoothly back to its normal apperance.

"Twelve seconds," Satsuki said, patting her on the back. They turned, facing stunned onlookers.

Ryuuko stepped up next to Satsuki, scowling intensely as she noticed how many had uncertainly refocused their aim.

"Lower your weapons!" Satsuki boomed. "Are you blind? Do you presume to overlook how swiftly we dispatched of the vermin that dared approach your doorstep?!"

"You didn't do a thing, Kiryuuin!" Takeda barked, eyes wide. "That little *freak* standing next to you did!"

"*Wrong!* " the sisters shouted at once, almost surprising each other. The effect to their audience of Satsuki's stern voice and Ryuuko's gruff voice combined was of considerably greater magnitude, and coupled with the morale-busting might of Satsuki's dazzling charisma to any who stood against her.

"I am Kiryuuin Satsuki! The power in my body has been honed to exceed what should be humanly possible!"

Ryuuko's arms were crossed; she glared sharply up at the onlookers, a cool, wolfish grin on her face as Satsuki's arm crossed her back, hand clapping onto her shoulder.

"My sister, Matoi Ryuuko, is a living weapon created to destroy Life Fibers! I am this weapon's precious fuel, as well as its wielder - the only being on this earth she will be made to answer to!"

Those that had yet to lower their weapons did so, abashed, falling prey to Satsuki's authoritative tone. She stomped, boot heel clacking no short of impressively against the dry earth beneath it as she tossed her long hair, letting it splay silkily behind her.

"We are the strongest team! Together, *WE* comprise humanity's greatest HOPE, and Life Fibers' direst FEAR! The enemy will cower before us, for WE are the REBELLION!!"

A roar of acclamation erupted from the building's windows, and spectators on the roof; fists pumped into the air. Satsuki showed them a coolly self-assured smile, even as she spoke under her breath, well under the continuing cheers, for the woman at her side.

"Was that alright, Ryuuko?"

Ryuuko, still wearing her best shit-eating grin, answered in the same fashion, lips nearly motionless. "Cast me as the ruffian only you can

control, huh? Well, looks like your plan won 'em over alright, so I'll roll with it," she said, chortling as they began to walk back together. "But I think you coulda' done without making it sound like I'm your bitch or somethin'."

"So coarse," Satsuki said of the choice of words, nose wrinkling briefly in distaste. But she gave an inquisitive look as a thought occurred to her; her voice then was low, curious. "Do you listen to the things you gasp when you're most excited? I distinctly recall, in another context, someone begging me to make her my-,"

"Oi!" Ryuuko's face was flushed. She leaned in close to the taller woman, an arm slung up onto her shoulder, a hand hiding her stiffly smiling mouth from anyone else. "Whatever I say when your tongue is on or *in* any part of me-,"

"It took exactly one hand to make you say that."

An eyebrow twitched, helpless. "W-well, what happens between us…"

"Stays between us," Satsuki finished, smiling. "I know that, Ryuuko."

"Good. I-I mean…" She gulped, warming cheeks reddening in a positive feedback loop as Satsuki's eyes drank in her flustered state. "… Ya' think that, I mean… Do you think the meritocracy might spare us our own room, now we've shown our worth?"

Satsuki smirked at her, though her look was no longer teasing but soft. "Maybe as soon as tonight, if we ask them."

Ryuuko ducked her head, holding back a clumsy grin. Her thumbs hooked in her pockets. "L-let's… let's do that. Please."

"So I can reward you for your good work?"

Ryuuko nodded quickly.

Satsuki gave a true laugh as they entered the opening gate.

-Trial-

End

Sub-title literal meaning: - inspiration

Mind Games at the End of Days

Chapter 17: Mind Games at the End of Days

"When I contacted you in your dreams… what did you think I used, but your own machinery - your brain? You have sorely underestimated the power of a nervous system parasite… to map out, catalogue, and reproduce all those primitive little pulses that flit about in your skull." In which The Enemy deems Ryuuko fit for breaking.

WARNING: this chapter and the next contain depictions of self-harm.

Also note that this chapter, there will be instances where Ryuuko and 'the enemy' have back-and-forth lines of thought in a row. They'll never switch over sentence to sentence in the same paragraph, but it might be a bit confusing. I'd say that I'm aiming for/it would be ideal if you're sometimes initially confused which one's thinking, but can generally differentiate promptly by the content or tone of the thought, because this will reflect Ryuuko's confused/unconfident state of mind.

Finally, as at least one reader has been confused, note that Takeda has no relation to the canon character Takarada. (I didn't notice their names were similar enough to be confusing, or I would have probably picked a different feudal lord or other historical figure to name him after)

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

AT THE END OF DAYS

Seventeen \ Mind Games - - At the End of Days

Come on. Come on*. What am I doing hanging around here? I know I got places to be. Answers to find.*

Eyes opening, Ryuuko, in her sleepiness, spent a surreal moment figuratively looking her thoughts in the face before she figured it out. She sat up with a groan.

Not quite.

Oh? Still not convincing enough? How do you notice?

As if I'd explain it if I could… Ryuuko smiled at her older sister's slumbering form as she pulled a shirt over her head - that, and some shorts, were all she needed for a run to the showers down the hall.

Satsuki sleeps a little longer than normal, after I've had to use her power, doesn't she…

Yesterday's fight with a three-core system had been another breeze, like many in the last few weeks. After it Ryuuko had easily enough talked the powers that be (namely, Takeda) into increasing Satsuki's meal ration, so she could keep her strength up.

Food chain.

She flinched.

Was that one not 'obvious'? Or was it simply too accurate?

Shut the fuck up!

Alright.

Ryuuko rested a hand on the doorknob, a towel in hand.

'Guardians,' the people called them. Said their arrival had been 'salvation.' Ryuuko and Satsuki received smiles when they passed, smiles from people who had been somber and despairing, living mechanically, for far too long.

This was a fine path; the evidence was plain as the revitalizing people, and the checkup routine Satsuki had Ryuuko run through every few days. A hundred meter sprint, and a weightlifting test. Simple tasks, but ones that showed clearly enough that her physical abilities could in theory increase as quickly as she could absorb Life Fiber clusters.

I'm getting stronger with every fight. I'll absorb every cluster that wanders this way… Each one's human energy and Life Fibers become my own power. And then, once I'm strong enough, I might check out whatever trap it is you're tryin' to set.

Her eyes grew. *Wait…?*

Oho - still noticed me? All I did that time was nudge the direction - tweak a few signals here and there, as they passed through…

Her teeth clenched nervously.

When she opened the door, she almost started at the sound of a folded paper clacking on its side to the floor. Rubbing her neck, she bent down and grabbed the note that had been wedged in the doorframe.

She blinked as she shut the door again. She turned over the paper in her hand, and turned it back; she rubbed her eyes, and studied it a long moment. There was handwritten text there. It was certainly Japanese.

She understood none of it.

Guess who finished mapping out the part of your brain responsible for reading comprehension? 'her' thoughts sang. *Think how miserably I could have you score on another IQ test…*

Her mouth was dry. She hunched over, staring at text that seemed to blur nonsensically. The paper shook in her hands. If she focused hard enough, she could identify single phonetic characters at a time, and the simplest kanji. But she couldn't even begin converting it into any sort of cohesive thoughts.

She was starting to breathe quickly when a scream pierced the air - one of the most horrible sounds she'd ever heard. It sent a jolt down her spine, making her spin on heel.

Satsuki was peacefully asleep.

Y-you-

The scream blared through her skull again, lifelike. She jumped in startlement, bumping into the door, even as she watched the present Satsuki lying in bed unharmed.

At the sounds of her small panic, Satsuki stirred and opened her eyes. She blinked at Ryuuko staring back at her.

Her eyes narrowed discerningly on her pale face. She sat up. "What's the matter?"

"I-I…" Ryuuko fumbled a moment. "There's a note someone left," she covered weakly. She started walking toward her.

"Oh…? What does it say?"

"Didn't read it," she said, handing it over. "I ain't good with reading first thing in the morning."

"You're kidding…?"

Ryuuko forced an uneasy laugh. She realized she hadn't even been able to gather how long the note was. Her face flushed as Satsuki finished reading it in all of four seconds, and eyed her suspiciously.

"There are enough practice blades for the entire group, now. They would like us to assist with training again later today," she said, handing it back. Ryuuko reached out.

Satsuki's clavicle, snapping with a solid crack under a horrific blow. A gut-wrenching shriek.

It was only an instant. In that instant, Ryuuko's hand twitched violently, drawing short before she could grasp the paper.

"Ryuuko?"

Her hand grasped at the air, missing the paper again as the scream raked freshly at her mind, louder than it was in life, sickening. She was breathing fast.

"Ryuuko, can you hear me-?!"

"I'm fine! I'm- f-fine… No, no, I think- I'm not fine-,"

I'm gonna be sick-

It's repeating now - it's on a fucking loop-

CRACK!

Ryuuko barely saw Satsuki move before Ryuuko's feet were off the ground; pain was screeching in her jaw, rocking through her skull as the room spun with a dizzying crash of light.

Her back slammed down, and it was quiet.

Satsuki grimaced in disconcertment as a smile bared Ryuuko's bloody teeth, and a look of relief, almost triumphant, washed through eyes angled dazedly toward the ceiling.

Satsuki tried her name again; this time Ryuuko groaned, spitting out a globule of blood. "N-nice shot…" she said slowly, clumsy fingers tenderly finding the ugly splotch of purple now dusting the lower edge of her chin.

"I'm sorry," Satsuki said, kneeling at her side.

"It's cool," Ryuuko said softly, mildly concussed. Her eyes shut, face a mask of tranquility. She grasped Satsuki's wrist, stroking her arm thoughtlessly as Satsuki was trying to check her pulse. "Was the right move. 'S'all quiet now…"

"Ryuuko." Satsuki touched her shoulders, looking at her squarely. "I'm *worried* about you."

The concern didn't go beyond her eyes, but it stood out sharply on an otherwise impassive face. It tightened something in Ryuuko's chest, the subtle impact striking more profoundly than the Kiryuuin's smarting radiance ever could.

"These… panic attacks? They're worsening, aren't they?"

Ryuuko squeezed her eyes shut a moment. Reaching up, she folded her hands loosely behind Satsuki's back. "… I need s'more time."

"How *much* more?"

"Not much. I promise, I'll figure it out."

Satsuki hung her head, giving a slow exhalation.

"C'mon," Ryuuko said. "Let's get ready for the day…"

When I contacted you in your dreams… what did you think I used, but your own machinery - your brain? You have sorely underestimated the power of a nervous system parasite… to map

out, catalogue, and reproduce all those primitive little pulses that flit about in your skull.

You were so quiet the last few weeks. Ryuuko kept to her sprinting, breath ragged against a burning throat, brow formidably stern. She passed other runners on the track, who watched in amazement each time she zipped by. Satsuki had been noticeably reluctant to leave her, but Ryuuko wasn't up for overseeing sword training, either way. Satsuki was brilliant for teaching the refugees to wield blades, and instructing them on how to target and effectively strike at clusters' weak points. But Ryuuko felt too out of place there.

Especially now.

I was collecting information. I wouldn't want to alert you before I had enough.

Enough to do what?

A laugh - and she almost felt like laughing with it, infected as it spilled over. It only ever talked to her with her own voice, anymore. *For what? Your experiences, your emotions - I can recreate them all. I don't even need to torment you with sullen thoughts to cause you grief, now. If I simply prod your brain with such a signal, and this chemical is released-*

She tripped - got herself a mouthful of turf. And she lay there, wide eyes leaking with the unstoppable onset of tears as a knot twisted in her throat, clawing, urging, demanding of her to wail out. She held the sound determinedly at bay, as other refugees flocked to her side, asking if she was alright.

What are human emotions, really? What even is the human heart? Such a simplistic thing…

A man knelt at her side was saying something, offering a hand, none the wiser as she struggled to rise against a crippling downpour of despair.

Bastard's got it so easy. Break his arm.

Meaningless anger flared abruptly in her skull, kicking her into a rage. She sprang to her feet - decidedly away from the startled man trying to help her - and tried to hide her watering eyes.

That stupid face. That pisses me off!

It doesn't!

She turned, hands grasping her upper arms in distrust as she pushed through the others that had gathered. Shit; word of this would find its way to Satsuki in a heartbeat.

Threaten them to silence.

I won't act on your phony thoughts.

I told you, a thought is a collection of electrical impulses. Every one of these thoughts is technically your own, even if we generate them.

You still can't affect my actions. She reached the door to the school building. Her push blew it off its hinges and into the hallway inside.

She gawked at the door lying on the dusty tiles, at the kanji 'push' inscribed above the handle.

But it seems we can influence you more effectively by making subtler adjustments. I see…

Ryuuko bit the inside of her cheek, barely breaking the soft skin.

Wincing, she correctly re-identified the character she'd been staring at as the kanji for 'pull.'

She swore. Her head shook numbly, as her breath started to quicken.

If I render you illiterate, you'll notice immediately. But if I swap your association of just a few characters the next time you're trying to read something, think of the trouble I can cause…

She bit down until her teeth snapped together, decisively silencing it with the coppery heat that flooded into her mouth.

From what she could tell, the enemy didn't mess with her the next time she was reading.

But it didn't quit screwing with her.

I fucking hate humans. All of them. Stupid shits like my dad. He got to give up his fight and pile everything on my shoulders… He didn't prepare me for this. Why'm I carrying on his fight, anyway? To save these scumbags who smile at me like they know me or somethin'? They think I'm a freak. They know it. They all need to die. Ungrateful. All of these pigs. I'll crush all of them, I'll spill their blood. The earth should be red, anyway. It should be one cloth. No one to hurt me, no one for me to hurt. That'd be so much better.

I fucking hate humans. All of them. Stupid shits like my…

She'd stopped bothering with opposing thoughts, stopped bothering with telling the enemy how stupid the diatribe was, a few hours after her thoughts had begun repeating it that morning. Her inner cheeks, however quickly healed, were stained with the stale, musty rankness of her own furtively swallowed blood.

Now she ignored the endless loop, features taut as she accepted a bowl in the supper line and fought the urge to snarl at the worker who smiled at her.

Every now and then, it would jabber in a new, contextual insert-

Ungrateful. All of these pigs. Stupid fucking line. Why should a god wait in line? This bastard in front of me, I can slam this bowl across

his skull. He'd die like an ant. Wouldn't that be hilarious? Come on. Punch him now, and I can snap at least three ribs easy. Or bust a kidney-

She ignored it, along with the kick of hysterical anger that banged and screamed against her skull. She stood in line.

I fucking hate humans.

Drain her. Come on, right now. Drain her! All that power of hers belongs to you. It's your right.

You can make her weak, so easily. Pretentious sow. Show her who's boss.

Cause you both know who's boss. Whatever games you play to try to convince yourself otherwise, it ain't gonna change.

I ain't gonna-

The scream - she'd stopped flinching too hard at it.

Overused that one, have I?

She didn't answer. She wouldn't react, wouldn't let it beat her.

A different scream - that made her stiffen. Not long after that one- *KIKEN DANZETSU!* - feeling Yoriyoshi's mutated flesh split beneath her strike-

'I made a mistake when I tried to crush the defect's skull, didn't I, Ryuuko-sama?'

Her eyes peered unblinking into the dark, at Yoshi's twisted voice.

*'**You're** the only one who's allowed to make her scream like that, right?'*

A memory of Satsuki's face, covered in blood and pain - as Ryuuko pummeled her, savage.

Sinister joy swelled in her gut, shuddered against her lungs, as she felt her fists burn, relishing in her foe's helplessness.

Drain her.

You think she can stop you? She can't stop you, you know.

Drain her.

Ryuuko pulled numbly away from the arms of the woman whose front was against her back. She shifted to the edge of the bed, still facing away.

She knew Satsuki was awake from the motion.

Talk. Just start talking. Talk to her. She'll listen. I can t-talk.

She shivered as a well-timed surge of anxiety drilled and clogged her mind.

She was a fool.

The day after one it had spent exclusively running the thought *I love Life Fibers* on obnoxious repeat, she had woken to silence, and welcomed it. First cautiously, but she wore a true smile and couldn't let it go even by the time she settled down for the night. It had been wonderful. A full day, undisturbed. She slept so well.

She was halfway through another beautiful day when the invasive thoughts slammed her. She fled the running track in a panic, staggered up a hallway, brought to her knees and clutching her shoulders as it assailed her. The crack of Satsuki's breaking collarbone - *the scream* - the crunch of Yoriyoshi's neck beneath her

kick - her own jaw shattering in the same fight - the urge to break, to crush, to kill-

"Ryuuko-cha~n!"

She gawked up into the smiling face, a sight that just about tore her heart in two and stuffed the pieces in a meat grinder.

"You were getting too good at ignoring it, so it gave you a break! Ryuuko-chan!"

She broke. "You're not here!!"

"Of course I am, silly!" The bubbly girl leaned down, prodding the stark-faced woman's forehead with one finger and winking sweetly. "I'm not just a friend inside your head, right? I'm right here, aren't I?"

Grief.

Ryuuko's shoulders shook, and wouldn't stop shaking.

She pressed her thumb intently against the tip of a small scissor in her pocket, and watched Mako disappear.

She's still a fool.

When she's flooded with happiness, plain, innocuous happiness and joviality, she can only enjoy it. On an emotional level, she virtually can't resist enjoying it. There's a spring in her step. She loves everyone. She almost wants to hug Takeda when he glares suspiciously at her as they pass. She chats with people at dinner.

She's on cloud nine. Walking on air.

All the further to swing her back down again, the instant it decides to slam her mood into the pavement.

She wants to scream.

"What do you think you're doing, young lady?" Ragyou asked. "What do you think you'll accomplish?"

Ryuuko stared back, shoulders hunched over as she sat on a dusty old crate. This was a quiet place she'd found. A quieter place, at least. No one came here.

No one real.

Except for Ryuuko. She's real.

"Of course you are, dear!" Ragyou drawled sweetly before her, cupping her cheek. "You're every bit as real as me!"

Ryuuko stared blankly as Ragyou laughed.

She shattered the stolen glass in her hand.

"You *know* I'll be back," Ragyou reminded her, "as soon as the pain wears off. You know that, so why do this?"

Ryuuko selected a large piece of glass. It really doesn't want her to do this, does it?

She's not sure how it came to this, but the strongest she can feel is if she does what it doesn't want her to.

"I'll be seeing you soon-,"

She squeezed so sharply a crimson shard punched out between two knuckles.

Teeth clenched, she ripped the fragment free. She gasped brokenly, tipping her head back, and grinned, clenching her dripping hand in the perfect silence that ensued. The pain sucked her in. The freedom was bliss.

I'm me. Right now.

These thoughts are me; I'm here, and I'm me. Just the real me…

And that, she decided, was preferable.

She bit into her folded belt before she picked up a bottle of rubbing alcohol at her feet.

She unscrewed the cap, held out her bleeding hand, and poured.

Of course it's back eventually.

And it's harder to escape, when it takes hold of her dreams.

The enemy is supremely calm, where it sits across from her. It doesn't begin to debate with her, doesn't speak for a time. Just stares at her, chin propped on one hand, legs crossed at the knees, entertainment glinting in the cold crimson of its eyes.

The space is different now; no longer does a calming, warm glow permeate it, meant to disarm. It is a cancerous gray, with flakes of ash suspended in shakily throbbing air.

"Nothing to say?" the enemy inquires at length. "Nothing about, I dunno, how wonderful it is to be a human?"

Ryuuko's hunched shoulders shake. "Get out."

"I'm a part of you, remember? And you're a part of me. Look at yourself."

Ryuuko doesn't remember sitting down. But she notices her knees are crossed, and her chin propped on one hand.

Stray light glints on the space between them.

Ryuuko's growl borders on bestial. She stands, strides forward in shambling steps, toward an enemy who does just the same.

Her hands fling foward when it stands before her, hands slipping unimpeded through the silvered glass, latching onto its skull, as it does the same to her, all the same.

Cracks splay jaggedly across the mirror, ruining its sleek surface, as their foreheads collide with a devastating crash.

With the enemy's vicious smile, Ryuuko smiles back. The familiar face before her is warped in the web of shattered glass; sharp-edged crevices are made fine canals for a thick outpouring of blood, down between their eyes.

*"You get it, don't you? Pitiful creature," it croons, sharp teeth flashing. "You know **exactly** who the enemy is."*

And it winds back and smashes its fist forward, into a Ryuuko who shatters.

She's crashing into the earth, with horrific force - bones snapping easily as toothpicks, as she hurtles like a ragdoll through breaking, wailing earth.

Sliding to a stop, gasping in confusion and pain, to see the enemy against a crimson sky, falling, snarling like a fiend-

Crashing harshly against her, a hand plunged through her chest, smashing soundly through everything in its path.

Ryuuko's eyes bulge as its hand withdraws in one violent motion to brandish its furiously beating prize, with a tyrant's strength, with a smile of bloodlust and triumph contorting its stolen face.

She can't protest, and her life force is obediently burning its way free, ripping her apart, stripped by cruel insatiability from a battered body powerless to withhold it-

Her scream as it assimilates her, her raw scream that pierces the air until its clawed hand snaps shut on a now fibrous, threadbare heart-

It's a scream of pleasure.

She woke to an explosion of dull color and light - blinking eyes, adjusting on the buckwheat hulls that scattered from the pillow halves in her clawing hands, the thing she'd buried her face in when she threw herself on the bed earlier. Coughing and swearing, chest seizing on a sob, she rubbed roughly at her eyes, toppled from the bed, whimpering as she slapped and kicked at a tangling blanket until it freed her. In a confused scramble, she found herself drawing her head up over the waste bin in the corner before her gut gave a convulsive heave.

A minute after she was finished, panting in the silence, she withdrew trembling hands from the bin and gripped her shoulders. When another sob tried to shake her, she held it in.

Midday - Satsuki had gone off with Houka to oversee the trainees, and Ryuuko had retreated to the room. She was alone.

She tore her clothes off with vehemence, garments that clung to cold, sickly sweat. Her nails began to dig into a bare shoulder.

Breathing- she was breathing too quickly, growing lightheaded. She shuddered her way through a deep breath, and then another.

Her eyes had fallen on a dark blue uniform on the wall.

-"You'll catch cold, Ryuuko…"-

Her scowl softened. She put on a new set of clothes, grabbed she sailor uniform, and left the room.

Giving him a wash was good for her nerves. She hadn't been able to offer him more luxury than a flame-heated iron in years, but she handwashed him with care. She got the dust out; she scrubbed

behind his lapels, nails scratching lightly, the way he'd liked. And she watched him closely, as always. He was unresponsive, as always.

When he was mostly dry, she returned him to his hanger on the wall. Her hand remained on the shoulder of the comatose uniform.

"Hey," she said quietly.

…

Her nails bit into her palm, until it dripped. She smeared the hand below his closed eye, waiting, with some pretense of hopefulness, as the blood faded away from the fine weave of his exterior.

He didn't change. He never did.

"Is this…" She looked down, watching the wound fade from her hand. "Did you ever feel like this, I wonder…?" A chuckle. "One time, you got all afraid you'd eat me someday, right? That your instincts made you dangerous."

Her forehead rested against her old friend, pressing him to the wall.

"I didn't even take it seriously, did I? I said 'you'll never do that!' and that was that. But you were good at dealing with what you are, weren't you? You were never a threat to me, unless I lost my head and messed you up first."

She looked up. "How'd you do it? If you could tell me… if you could just wake up and tell me what to do…"

Her shoulders shook; tears stung her cheeks.

"Why won't you wake up? Why?! Why won't you answer me anymore?!"

She froze at the touch - the soft warmth against her back, wrapping snugly across her middle at her front. Her balled hands loosened, leaving behind light creases in the damp cloth.

"Ryuuko," Satsuki said softly behind her, chin resting on her shoulder. Her eyes shut beneath a furrowed brow. "I don't know what you're fighting, but it's kicking your ass."

"I…" The girl's arms fell to her sides. "I didn't hear you come in."

Satsuki's arms around her waist tightened for a moment. Then they slipped back, the heels of her palms brushing slowly over the curve of Ryuuko's hips.

The younger woman gasped, and welcomed the distraction of the warm body that conformed rather intimately to her back. It was true that Satsuki excelled at 'distracting' her; that, or Ryuuko was remarkably easily distracted. She leaned her head against the long-haired woman's, humming as firm hands worked her gently rocking hips. Weakening knees turned inward, and she bent forward slightly as a warm breath caressed her ear; and a sharp breath escaped her as one long-fingered hand glided down over her pants, tracing from her hip to the tight valley of her squeezing thighs.

"If you'd like, I can do it quickly…"

Holding back a whine at a strong grip on her inner thigh, Ryuuko started to nod. She licked her lips, before her mouth popped open at another almost playful squeeze. Verbal - she needed to say it for her. Satsuki wouldn't really go on until she answered clearly.

I hide things from her. I'm dangerous, but I'm too scared to tell her.

What'll she think, when she knows I'm compromised by the enemy? That my presence here puts everyone here in danger?

She knew they weren't her own thoughts. Her brow quivered, lips frozen on what might have become a word of consent.

I'm irresponsible. Selfish. A liar.

I don't deserve her hands on me.

"Ryuuko?" Satsuki said, concern prickling at her voice as she sensed tension in her form. Her hands had stopped in their tracks; the teasing grip on Ryuuko's thigh shivered, fingers peeling themselves back uncertainly. "Ryuuko, what's wrong?"

It was without warning that Ryuuko's perception shifted. Of all things, a sense of taboo, that had grown politely quiet as of late, loudened dramatically for a single moment, jarring her with abrupt discomfort, even disgust, at her and her sister's proximity. The effect was that she shuddered in the way of a struggle against her companion's hold, which in answer snapped away from her as if burned.

Ryuuko cringed. There was no salvaging this. "I-I'm… not really in the mood, actually. Sorry."

She *ached* as Satsuki stepped away from her. When she managed to look, there was muted hurt, guilt, in the long-haired woman's anxiously widened eyes. A deep sort of hurt, but not one Satsuki would readily admit, as she clapsed her hands in front of her. When she spoke in a moment, her voice was low but stern.

"*Never* apologize for that, Ryuuko. Just say so."

"Y-yeah," Ryuuko said. She knew she'd sent mixed signals. Even if she wasn't to apologize, she wanted to embrace her sister, to say she was alright.

I'm not alright.

So instead she stood as she was, unmoving and uncomfortably silent, letting the arm's length Satsuki had given her remain unbreached between them.

"Come on," Satsuki said finally, surprising her. "Let's get out for a bit."

Ryuuko blinked. "Out…?"

It was quiet as they trailed the group slowly down mossy steps, into what had once been a public park. Further downhill in the distance, not far from where a recon bot had spotted them earlier, was a herd of spotted deer, grazing by a creek.

Satsuki carefully folded the map she'd been provided, tucking it into a pocket with a smirk. The team they accompanied had had scarce need of the few more copies of the hand-drawn map dispersed among them; they knew the region impressively well. Ryuuko and Satsuki were chiefly here on guard duty; the hunting and retrieval party could breathe easier as they went about their mission, given that their present guests made the prospect of needing to fend off a cluster from without the safety of the walls considerably less formidable.

They were not wholly reliant on them, of course; they brought their usual weapons and starch grenades, as they always had before the duo called 'salvation' had come to the stronghold. In the event of a Life Fiber sighting, the party would seek escape rather than victory. Some of Satsuki's best students even carried swords at their hips, for the chance they might need to protect themselves. But most carried hunting rifles, and bows and arrows, which they now drew as they neared their quarry in the cover of unkempt greenery.

Few creatures know fear of humans, at this point, Satsuki mused, nocking an arrow on a bow as they fanned out, crept into range. After some deliberation, and signals from the captain, some of the party's number had split off, circled around; that group would aim for those not felled by the initial volley, as they fled. *Please… don't resent us for this.*

Ryuuko watched her sister pull to draw, as did the others in the team. Satsuki's slightly parted lips held a cool smile, as her sharp eyes tracked a calmly ambling target. Her body remained somehow deceptively relaxed while taut, as her bow and her limbs flexed in smooth concert under shared tension; light and shadow played a flattering game against toned arms and sure hands that did not

tremble or strain. She was flawless… she really was perfect for this place, wasn't she?

She belongs around humans. She fits here, and she can help people. She can help with practically everything, while I…

The younger sister had no experience with a bow; so she hung back and watched, as a man signaled the archers, and the prey was felled.

Minutes later found the two sisters seated on the hill, watching over from where they had a good view of the area, as the others went about the work of gathering the kills for transport.

"You fit so well," Ryuuko said, drawing an inquisitive look. She nodded toward the others. "You talk to them so easily. You have since we joined them."

"You haven't exactly been going out of your way to establish interpersonal relationships, since we arrived," Satsuki noted. "They said you were quite talkative, initially… What's happened?"

Ryuuko looked away. "I wonder…"

Satsuki grasped her hand. More that Ryuuko was unwilling to speak of, then. "I never asked you, did I? Before I told Takeda that we would stay here for a bit, I didn't stop to ask if you would be alright with it. We can go," Satsuki assured her, strong brows stern. "They can look after themselves for as long as it will take us to travel to Honnouji, and return. If you… if you perhaps feel unsafe, here…"

"I'm fine," Ryuuko said, cringing as she caught her meaning. "Stayin' here a little longer's just fine."

Satsuki sighed in relief.

How easily she believes you.

I'm not volatile. I won't hurt anyone.

You don't include yourself in 'anyone'? A sly, mocking note of approval.

Ryuuko scowled, listening determinedly to her sister.

"I know you were overwhelmed when we first arrived, Ryuuko. And I know that forming bonds may be… frightening, after the grief you've endured. But everyone here knows the pain of loss. You needn't remain alone."

"Sis…?"

"Are you afraid of being alone?" Satsuki's eyes were sympathetic. "Perhaps solitude is the natural enemy of someone given such a name…"

"I don't care for that meaning," Ryuuko tried to scoff, but she clasped Satsuki's hand nonetheless. *Abandoned child* - she'd heard enough of that in grade school, since the day her class had learned the character that meant *flow*, and some nasty third grader had decided its rarer meaning, *exile*, had to have been the idea behind the 'ryuu' of her name. *The abandoned child* was only too fitting, for the shy little mouse with the weirdly dyed hair, whose family never visited, who stayed around on break - maybe she was an orphan, or a reject, they'd said. Maybe there *was* something wrong with her. Maybe *that* explained why she ate all alone, and never talked to anyone, never got close to anyone, why she was such a freak.

She'd bloodied tiny fists for the first time, on the playground that day. She'd gotten her own fair share of scrapes and bruises, and a detention for starting the fight.

Humans can be really rotten, after all.

Ryuuko tensed. Had that been the enemy's cynicism, or her? Or a bit of both?

Satsuki's thumb pressed into her palm; her voice was soft, for the girl's somber look. "Ryuuko… I want you to know that no matter what should happen, I will *never* abandon you. You're my sister, and I will always be here for you if you need me. But I… I also understand that there are now… quite a few more fish in your sea, so to speak."

Ryuuko blinked. "Huh?" She studied Satsuki's face, as the woman gazed down the hill. To most, she would have appeared perfectly composed, even bored, though focused. But Ryuuko could see something forlorn in her eyes, and discomfort in her brow. Ryuuko shook her head. "H-*huh?* " she repeated.

"You grew attracted to me out of a dearth of options, did you not? If that's what you're now realizing after all… r-rather, if someone else would be able to better help you-,"

"No!" Ryuuko cried, grabbing Satsuki's arms; the elder sister was startled, until she found the younger was fighting not to laugh. "You think somethin' like that's been bothering me? And you were worried that I… that I don't need you anymore, or something?"

"*I* would not be troubled by such a thing," Satsuki said immediately, adamant.

"Alright," Ryuuko chuckled. "Then… I mean, I might think about it, someday, but… I think I'd still choose Nee-san. As long as she's still okay with her dumbass little sister, that is…"

"Of course she is," Satsuki said fondly, giving the girl's hair a ruffle. Snickering, Ryuuko ducked away and stood, looking down the hill as a light breeze swayed her hair.

"Sis… What'll we do when it's all over?"

Over?

"If we do it… if we make a world where people don't live in fear of Life Fibers anymore…"

As if we could do that.

Satsuki stood at her side, a hand coming to rest on her shoulder. "What, indeed…"

If we magically did bring about such a world, we wouldn't be needed anymore.

"It would be a wonderful thing, wouldn't it?" Satsuki went on. "But what sort of place will we have in such a world? After all this…"

It was our blood that condemned the human race.

"Idiot," Ryuuko scoffed. "There'll always be somewhere for you."

The humans who so adore and rely on you now would outcast you, naturally.

"Perhaps you are right. Then, we could return here, and help rebuild… we could travel the world and help as many survivors as we can. I think… that would be nice."

What a nice fairytale.

"And I'll have Sis with me," Ryuuko managed, laughing nervously. "Whatever happens…"

From seven billion to a few tens of thousands. This is the karma that already rests on your shoulders. The weight of the rest will be nothing.

"Yes…" When Satsuki touched a shivering hand, the girl grasped immediately. "That will never change. So let's face things one step at a time, Ryuuko. We can set out for Honnouji. We can even pack up as soon as we've returned to the stronghold. The people are strong enough to protect themselves in our absence; they have for three years."

"I know that," Ryuuko said. "Humans… they're strong, ain't they?" That was what she wanted to believe.

"We are," Satsuki said.

"Yeah," Ryuuko muttered. "Yeah, we are."

Satsuki's face was thoughtful. "When we arrived… you were so disheartened, weren't you? At how easily the entrance test got to you."

Ryuuko grimaced slightly. "Yeah, well - what about it?"

Satsuki smiled. "Once, you took offense at the thought that I would fight you at an advantage, without flinching. I stood in Junketsu against a fool who dared to challenge me while unable to activate her kamui - a young woman I fully believed to be an ordinary human. And I declared that a lioness uses the whole of her strength, even to hunt a rabbit. But the truth is, I, too, would have once been upset with the thought…"

-"We are Kiryuuin. Do you understand, Satsuki? There is power in our very name!"

"You say we're born stronger than other humans…? How is that fair?"

"Silly girl - you needn't trouble yourself with questions of fairness! Our power is a gift *from Life Fibers. A gift must not be squandered. Indolence is sin; wasted potential is sin. So we must rule over the idiot masses - it is simple destiny, my dear!"-*

Satsuki smiled combatively. "But humans are not so easily subjugated, are they? Ragyou was overthrown by someone she looked down upon. When faced with a superior force, the weak can make themselves stronger, smarter, or more determined. I was a self-righteous person, at that time… But still I would attest that it is not merciful or compassionate, but contemptuous, to hold back on

an opponent presumed inferior, when that opponent faces you with all their might."

"What's that got to do with us here?"

"Humans are surprising; they will doggedly resist and topple those who would threaten them. It is out of respect for such power that, when I resolve to face another human, I do so with all my strength, lest I be destroyed by my own negligence. Do you understand, Ryuuko? The enemy we face lacks this capacity. It has no respect for the tenacity of humankind; it knows naught of vulnerability or desperation, and so it lacks the capacity to acknowledge the strength that they breed. It considers its own power so enormous that we should be rendered inconsequential by comparison."

We are.

"Such an enemy as that… is one that we will never yield to."

Then any resistance we mount will be crushed without mercy.

"But," Satsuki noted, "it remains that before the Life Fibers, we stand at a tremendous disadvantage. An enemy about which we know little is the most dangerous of all. So we cannot afford to meet it with anything short of all we can muster."

"As in…"

A whistle grabbed their attention; a woman down the hill was waving an arm at them. It was time to move out.

Satsuki gave Ryuuko's shoulder a squeeze, and slung her light bag onto her back. "Two brains facing a predicament are generally more effective than one," she said pointedly, an inclined brow masking her concern. "If you wish to talk… there is no reason you *need* to wait until we've reached Honnouji."

Let us heap light chaff before the whirlwind.

In a moment, her lip wrinkled at Ryuuko's silence. "… Keep this in mind, will you?"

And to console ourselves,

"Yeah."

We'll call it 'fortification.'

Giving her one more look, Satsuki started down the hill. Momentarily, Ryuuko followed.

Humans are strong.

Are they?

I'm strong.

You are strong.

We're strong.

Life Fibers are stronger.

So what if you are.

Come now, you fool. These deer had a better chance of killing you than a rabbit has of felling a beast. The rabbit enjoys still better a chance, than you creatures have of besting your creator.

I am Matoi Ryuuko.

The new era's harbinger.

My sister is Kiryuuin Satsuki.

The snack.

I love her very much.

I've beat the living shit out of her a good few times.

Stop that!

And I liked it. I loved how strong it made me feel. I could almost get off on it.

Shut up! Shut up, shut UP!

Too close to home? it taunts, breaking character.

"Ryuuko?" Satsuki tried softly, watching her poke morbidly at her meat and rice.

I love my sister.

So I force her to keep living.

I am Matoi Ryuuko! My sister is Kiryuuin Satsuki! I love her very much! Kiryuuin Ragyou is dead-!

"So am I!" Mako chirped helpfully, sitting between Ragyou and Satsuki at the table.

Ryuuko rubbed her forehead. *Yes. Mankanshoku Mako is dead.*

"Because you failed!"

Her breath catches.

"You'll probably fail aaaall these people, too!" Mako added, nodding cutely as her arms spread to indicate the dining hall.

Ryuuko had to stop herself from answering aloud.

They have hope. They didn't used to talk so much.

"Yeah! Just think how crushed they'll be when you fail to protect them, too!"

At Ryuuko's side, a perpetually smiling Yoriyoshi nodded in agreement.

Ryuuko stood suddenly, sending her chair sliding back with a screech.

"I'm - not hungry. Imma' go back - I ain't feelin' too hot…"

A minute later she was running down an empty hallway, already squeezing a knot of barbed wire in her pocket.

Ryuuko stared at the small scissor handle protruding from her palm.

What…?

Oh, look - there goes the tactile feedback of your left arm!

No! You fucker! That's cheating!

I'll give it back if you put the scissor away and heal yourself. I ain't done with you.

Fuck you! Ryuuko stabbed her forearm this time, mindless as blood sprayed and spilled. The blade was terrifically sharp, she marveled in fleeting, grim fascination - had it always slid through flesh so easily? It was like watching a video; like suddenly, it wasn't even her arm.

You're right. It's mine. Every inch *of you is mine.*

Her vision blurred; her arm was veined with fibrous, shimmering red.

The enemy? The enemy is right here, and you will never escape it. This blood is Kiryuuin blood. This hand is the enemy's hand. Don't you see, you wretched abomination?

No matter how you're beaten, you don't seek help. No matter how pained, you don't cry out. All you do is aimlessly fight.

All you know how to do is fight. You can't exist among humans.

You can't even die.

You can only identify an enemy before you, and fight it.

Her brow trembled; her eyes couldn't blink. Seeds of frenzy were cracking behind them.

So? Fight me, Matoi Ryuuko. Attack your enemy.

She wrenched, savaged the arm with the blade, attacking in earnest as her breaths fell quick. *This ain't fair! Give it BACK! It's mine!! It-!*

And contrary to its word, with a snide *'See you soon!'* it gave back her sense of touch.

She screamed.

After Satsuki slugged me that time… I couldn't hear you. It wouda' been a knockout hit on anyone else, but it just shook me up a little. It was perfect. And for a couple minutes, while my head was scrambled, you couldn't touch me.

Oh, don't you think you're clever.

You mapped my mind in a normal state. If I'm in an 'off' state… all you can do is make noise.

A password reset for a compromised program. And how long do you suppose it will take the programmer to hack in again?

She took off the cap, and brought the bottle to her lips. She chugged the bitter drink.

She learned that intoxication gave her a more complex, airtight 'skew' than did the intense distraction and endorphin rush of physical pain.

Ryuuko was being far more sociable, lately.

Exclusively when she was drunk.

The stronghold had schedules for everything - meal times, chores, watch shifts. There were also set days and times that given members of the humble populace were permitted to consume alcohol, to ensure that no more than a small fraction might even potentially become intoxicated at a given time, and that enough people to carry out designated emergency tasks could always be guaranteed available.

Ryuuko, abusing the virtue of her value to the system, had gotten herself exempted from the schedule, and seemed to be making an earnest effort to get and keep herself inebriated as often as possible. While Satsuki was glad to see her managing to relax, she was naturally perturbed by yet another unusual behavior. The long-haired woman now leaned against the wall, watching her sister toast to yet another something or other with some fellows who used their more restricted drinking days to the fullest.

Satsuki frowned as the girl threw back her drink, to the cheers of the people around her. Anyone else of Ryuuko's weight, having guzzled the amount she already had at her speed, would have long since been passed out somewhere. But Ryuuko laughed and shouted boisterously along with the obnoxious crew, basking in the attention as they cheered and swooned over their hero.

"So," one man was saying, as Satsuki tuned boredly back into the broken conversation, "your big sis - even though she's the one leading sword practice, Miss Kiryuuin don't do that much of the fighting, huh? But being *the* Kiryuuin Satsuki, she must be damn tough, right?"

He glanced Satsuki's way, too far gone to either notice how loudly he spoke or be properly petrified by the look she shot him.

"You bet she's tough!" Ryuuko laughed.

"Yeah!" a woman a bit older than Ryuuko pitched in. "You weren't there? That time she sent Kazuo's entire crew flying across the mess hall without batting an eye?"

"Yeah, so, a blockhead like me's better for fightin' n' shit, when we gotta' deal w'those goddamn threads." Ryuuko hiccupped, taking another compulsive draught from her generously refilled mug - and half-emptying it in the process.

"So Miss Kiryuuin holds the attack dog's leash!" a young man jeered, poking Ryuuko on the neck.

"Hey, hey!" she laughed, clumsily waving him away as a bit of drink trailed from the corner of her mouth. "Me 'n sis are a team - *team* !" She held up a fist, boxed at the air in front of her. "Sis hits like a car, yeah? Me - I hit like a truck. But when I'm all supercharged up with her power, I can hit like - like, a lot *more* 'n a truck! Like, three trucks! At *least* three whole trucks!" she boasted, flexing one arm while holding up four fingers with the unsteady hand before her. She laughed with all of them, while the young woman at her side ruffled her messy hair.

Satsuki pushed from the wall, turning to go.

"Ey - wait, sis! Yeah, I see ya! Why dontcha' have a drink with us? Tastes like shit, but it'll help ya' relax!"

Satsuki looked back, seeing a soft, goofy grin sitting crooked on Ryuuko's face. But she shook her head. "In a world like this one… I will not blunt my senses or experiences in any way. Besides - the two of us are the most powerful warriors this place has to protect it. In the event of an attack, at least one of us ought to be prepared to fight."

"I ken totes fight!" Ryuuko slurred in complaint.

" 'Totes'?" Satsuki quirked a brow. "I wouldn't trust you running with safety scissors right now, Ryuuko."

Ryuuko had stood; now she staggered a few steps toward her. "So, what, you think I'm bein' reckless? I'm the irresponsible, stupid child as usual, jus' goofin' off all day while you sit over there'n send me disapproving looks?"

"I said nothing of the sort."

"Good! 'Cause you don't even know how it feels! How *could* you?! What would you fucking know…?!" The distress from before was cropping up in her wincing eyes. "You'll never…"

"Forget it," Satsuki urged. "Enjoy yourself now. If you want to talk, come to me when you're sober."

She turned, but had no sooner taken a step than Ryuuko lunged past her, hand meeting the wall with a sharp clap to bar her path. The shorter woman glowered up at her, face flushed with her condition, eyes dark.

Satsuki was struck by shock - disbelief that Ryuuko would so much as threaten her - and a quietly trilling alarm bell of fear.

Ryuuko was struck by Satsuki's fist levering itself sharply into her gut, and staggered with a croaked wheeze before sprawling gracelessly to the floor, arms cradling her middle. The more perspicacious of her drinking friends became very quiet; the remainder hooted with laughter and jeers. Satsuki scowled at them as Ryuuko's hunched form shivered, pushing a coarse oath between gasps. The younger woman lurched to toss a rancid amalgamation of her last few drinks violently out onto the floor before her.

Satsuki turned on heel.

"Y-you *bitch… !* " Ryuuko coughed, recovering some breath.

Satsuki sent a warning look back at her. "Come again?" she said, as Ryuuko rose.

"Wanna go?"

Satsuki had to resist gawking as her swaying sister raised her fists, feet spread. *You completely skipped the conflict avoidance phase…? God, you fool…* Satsuki shook her head, continuing to leave; but in frustration, she couldn't blunt the chill venom on her tongue. "Sit down, you child. I don't have time to spar with drunkards."

"Huh?! Yeah, you better run! Get back over here, and I'll knock those bushy caterpillars clean off your face!"

Satsuki met her eyes sharply.

Ryuuko couldn't remember the last time she got her ass *handed* to her.

It might've been a mistake to snap a challenge when she couldn't see straight or walk straight, she realized, amid prying ineffectually at the solid headlock her sister had her in. She pushed a curse through her strained windpipe - felt the grip loosening - and saw stars as she bounced away from the wall Satsuki slammed her throbbing cranium against.

Then she was caught again, head tucked under Satsuki's arm, unable to fight as a hammerlike fist clocked her six or seven clean times in her rather unhappy stomach.

Released with a firm shove, Ryuuko clutched at her middle and reeled dizzily, stumbling over a chair. Finding herself on the ground, she booted the toppled chair toward the stone-faced Kiryuuin, whose knee snapped up to casually break it in two.

Ryuuko grinned crookedly, eyes wide. *Aw… shit,* she thought, elevated shoulders and head dropping back with a thud. *She's not even trying, is she…*

Gazing listlessly at the ceiling, she gave a whimper as a new pressure sank against her aching throat. Grimacing sharply, she gripped the ankle instinctively, trying to budge the boot. "S-sis… !" she whined, eyebrows pressing inward. *You win - you win! Fuck!* "*Mercy*… !"

"You've lost," Satsuki observed, glaring warily down at her. "Say you give up."

"Ghf… I-I…" Ryuuko reached out to the side, ready to slap the floor in submission.

That was when her pain vanished. Along with everything else.

You made it so easy to map your intoxicated brain…

She went very still. In the washed-out world above her, she registered Satsuki's eyes narrowing in confusion, muted concern. But she felt nothing - no pain, no terror, no grief, no panic. She was empty. Flattened into nothing.

You have no refuge. ***Nothing*** *to take hold of.*

"Ryuuko? Surrender now. Or would you like me to break your nose?"

Though she still lacked pain, the floodgate barring her emotions ruptured, explosive. Turmoil drowned her immediate desperation to remain herself; a flare of irritability was the only nudge it took. "Why don't you try it, bitch?!"

For a moment, Satsuki stared at her in disbelief - utter bewilderment. Then her eyes hardened.

STOMP!

A shriek.

Sharp enough pain still snapped its hold, then. It was good to know, as she thrashed and rolled onto her side, hands at her face growing slick with blood. She howled and swore.

"Give up!"

"I give! You win! I'm sorry!" She shook, cradling her head in her hands with a sob. "I'm sorry…"

She might have heard the clack of a heel; somehow she knew Satsuki had left. There were whispers in the air-

"Ruthless…"

"I don't think Kiryuuin broke a sweat…"

"Matoi got *punished*… !"

-but there was nothing going through her head but her own thoughts, her own pain, and enough of that to keep her on the ground, gritting her teeth, sick to her stomach and more than a bit afraid to touch her nose. So all in all, she wasn't so bad off.

-Mind Games-

[img: http://orig03.deviantart.net/3489/f/2016/010/c/2/headlock2st_by_hinata0321-d9neyub.png]

End

- psychological warfare

Limit at the End of Days

Chapter 18: Limit at the End of Days

"Knowing you won't die isn't enough. I don't simply care about your life; it's the rest of you that needs looking after."

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

AT THE END OF DAYS

Eighteen \ Limit - - At the End of Days

Satsuki studied the figure curled up with a pillow near the bedside for a good several minutes after she awoke the next morning. There was tape across her face, with already-pale splotches of jagged blue peeking out from the area about her nose. A few people had helped her to the infirmary, Satsuki knew; Satsuki had lingered out of sight, but hadn't truly abandoned Ryuuko for the night, until she had confirmed that much.

Sighing, she sat up. "Ryuuko."

Only once the girl had cracked open darkened lids, and made hesitant, baleful eye contact, did Satsuki approach.

"You still reek of alcohol," she noted, helping her sit up at the wall. Ryuuko was cooperative, silent, as Satsuki took her bruised chin gently in hand, examining her. "How's your face?"

"Hurts like a…" Ryuuko's croaking voice caught. She averted bloodshot eyes, wincing as Satsuki prodded carefully at the cartilage of her nose. "… It hurts."

"It's unlike you," Satsuki said, "to take your time surrendering in a petty fight when you've lost. What were you thinking?"

A shrug.

Satsuki frowned. "Takeda expects me to control you. With his people watching, you must have known I'd deliver on my words."

"Yeah," Ryuuko said, "I wasn't thinkin' straight. But are you that scared of Takeda? I thought you said you'd be running things around here by now."

Satsuki rested a hand on Ryuuko's knee, giving a light squeeze. "Do you really think it's for lack of ability to that I've yet to seize command?"

Ryuuko shook her head. "Then…?"

"You've still got somewhere to be, don't you, Ryuuko? And when you go, I'll go with you. So we can't have these people relying on us yet."

Ryuuko nodded.

"So," Satsuki said, "when do we leave?"

The short-haired one bit her lip. "… Soon."

Satsuki eyed her. "You don't seem to be particularly enjoying yourself here," she said flatly. "So why the hesitation?"

"… We'll go, soon," Ryuuko said, lowering her head to hide her eyes.

Satsuki patted Ryuuko's knee a moment. When it was clear she planned not to elaborate, the older sister sighed and stood.

"You reek of alcohol," Satsuki said softly. "But before you began to drink, I suppose… you kept turning up reeking of your own blood."

Ryuuko looked up with a start. "I-I healed. I always washed up… !"

"You underestimate my senses."

Ryuuko grumbled, abashed.

"… I'm *worried* about you, Ryuuko. Do you know that?"

"Yeah."

"Look me in the eye when you speak to me. I love you, and I'm worried about you. Do you understand that?"

"Y… yeah, I do."

Studying her another few seconds, Satsuki turned to go.

Ryuuko's foot jutted forward to trip her.

Satsuki caught herself, looking back. She saw a peculiar look on her face - wide eyes, as if Ryuuko was surprised at her own actions, and grimacing in regret.

Ryuuko saw in Satsuki, for the third time in less than twelve hours, a look of severity born of sheer, almost startled disbelief at Ryuuko's behavior.

Shivering, Ryuuko seemed to brace for a reprimand of the physical sort. Scowling, Satsuki turned.

"W-wait!" Ryuuko called as she made for the door.

"What?" Satsuki said, not looking back.

"K… kick me. Please! Hit me, something! As hard as you can!"

Satsuki glared back, aching at the words; the girl was cradling her head in her hands.

"P-please… Help… I hate this! So fucking much!"

"… You were just trying to get me to *hurt* you, back there…?"

A choked sob. Satsuki stepped back toward her.

"Ryuuko-,"

The alarm blared through the compound, making the girl jump. Satsuki swore.

"I'll tell them the rifle squads need to handle this one," she said. But Ryuuko was quickly on her feet, grabbing her shoulder.

"I have to fight. *We* have to fight. I talked too much shit last night to ask for a day off."

Satsuki was about to say how little she thought of anyone else's opinion, just now, but hesitated. Her sister's face was firm. *If you have an objective before you, you're alright…* "Are you sure?"

"Yeah." Ryuuko's watery eyes glinted with humor. "Let's at least show 'em you've got me safely back on my leash."

"In that case, you'd better hit the cluster with the force of *at least* three trucks."

Ryuuko laughed as they left the room, smiles on their faces, trepidation in their hearts.

For now, it's an enemy we've faced hundreds of times before.

Ryuuko knelt at Satsuki's side, eyes on the cluster in the distance. A whopping five cores - tough enough to be a bit of trouble, if fought with ordinary means. But nothing that'd threaten their 'combination.'

Is that… is that why I want to stay here? Where there's a routine, and nothing's unknown? It seems so easy, it's like a game. And we're showered with praise, cheered for after every match.

She clasped the hand Satsuki offered.

Here, we get to feel like we're doin' something. We get that payoff. And yeah, we are helping the people.

Satsuki gasped, and gave in. Ryuuko gritted her teeth, feeling the power coursing richly into her system. With all the Life Fibers Ryuuko had absorbed, the new energy had even more to stand upon and strengthen within her. Invigorated, Ryuuko caught Satsuki effortlessly, lowering her to the ground.

But did I really just lose sight of the goal? she thought, glaring at the approaching cluster. *A whole world we can't help from the safety of these walls?!*

"Wait," Satsuki murmured, grasping her wrist.

"*What's up?* " Ryuuko said, voice echoing with a soft crackle of power. Her eyes grew as she looked at the woman in her arms.

"A-are you… sure that's all you need?"

Satsuki's cheeks were flushed, against her pale face; her eyes, with slightly dilated pupils, noticeably struggled to remain focused. Her lips were parted delicately, face soft, as silent conflict flickered stubbornly behind her half-drooped eyelids.

"I-I just mean… If you do need some more… n-no, I mean…"

How blind have I been?

She should have noticed, when Satsuki had her use her power even against the weakest of clusters. She should have noticed this expression on her face.

But she'd been stuck inside her own head.

"*This is plenty*," Ryuuko said with a reassuring smile, wincing as cold sweat prickled at the back of her neck. "*… You know that, don't you?*

"

Shivering, Satsuki seemed to get a hold of herself, and nodded. Her face was firm again. "Go, Ryuuko. Take down the enemy."

"*Yes*," Ryuuko said quietly, and did just that. Now was the time for the enemy before them.

[THE ENEMY]

[ENEMYENEMYENEMYENEMYENEMY]

The characters hammer themselves out on the air, shaking and twitching madly, showing in scorching contrast to the crumbling, soot-stained space she's in. However she turns, she can't escape them; they burn into being before her eyes, each one drilling her retinas, relentless, before flickering away, suddenly replaced-

[ENEMY]

[WHOSE ENEMY]

[MY ENEMY]

[YOUR ENEMY]

[EVERYONE'S ENEMY]

[THAT ENEMY]

[WHO IS IT?]

[WHERE IS THE ENEMY?]

[WHERE]

[WHAT KIND OF ENEMY]

[WHAT KIND OF PERSON]

[WHAT KIND OF DIVINITY]

[IT'S A COWARD]

[A LONELY ENEMY]

[A MISERABLE PERSON]

[AN ANGRY GOD]

[THE NEW ERA'S]

[HARBINGER]

[THE ENEMY IS RIGHT BEFORE YOU]

[IT'S OBVIOUS]

[THE ENEMY]

[IS NOT ONLY LIFE FIBERS]

[THIS WORLD'S ENEMY…]

[HUMANITY'S ENEMY]

[KIRYUUIN SATSUKI'S ENEMY]

[MATOI RYUUKO'S ENEMY]

[IS, NATURALLY…]

"Ryuuko-chaaan!"

"Foolish daughter…"

"You child."

"Ryuuko-sama…"

[MATOI RYUUKO]

"Poor dear… she's *terrified* you, hasn't she?"

Ragyou's hands were exploring, and Ryuuko didn't have the energy to resist the obscene hallucination. She sat in the dark, glum, glaring at the floor as false sensations were made to run through her body, all in her mind.

"You trusted her to control you. You thought *she* could be your insurance? That she could resist you?"

An involuntary gasp. The hallucination was atypically keen on interaction.

"But she's made it clear enough that you'll be shouldering that burden alone…"

"Satsuki's *strong*… Way stronger than me! She'll never fall prey to the e-en… to Life Fibers…"

"You saw her lapse, didn't you?" Ragyou crooned. "Her judgment, her rationality… What are these, before the transcendent *bliss* you can give her?!"

Ryuuko groaned in disgust as false arousal pounded loudly in her mind.

"Humans are dumb beasts… beasts designed to yield before us. Your sister is not special-,"

Ragyou's hands on Ryuuko froze as Ryuuko lifted the loaded pistol in her hand, turning it toward her gut.

"I'm comin' for you. When I find you, you're fucking *dead* ."

Ragyou 'hmm'd, a stark white hand grasping her wrist to turn the gun upward. Ryuuko didn't want to think about the fact that this Ragyou shouldn't have the power to move her arm. "Even you'll get in trouble, for stealing something like this…"

"I'll put it back where I found it. And I only took one bullet."

"It simply won't do, to waste it." Ragyou nestled the silencer's tip in the hollow between Ryuuko's chin and throat. "How about here, then…?"

"For you to give out recommendations…" Ryuuko began, still toneless. "If I really damage my brain, you'll have a field day rewiring it with Life Fibers, right?"

"There's a limit to how contrary you can be…"

Ryuuko lowered the gun, quickly positioning it over a nerve cluster in her shoulder. Her lip wrinkled.

"Can you even pull the trigger? Come now; once you recover, the threshold of pain through which I can reach you will simply continue to expand…"

"I'll kill you."

"Go ahead and take your moment of clarity. I'm sure you'll choose well what to do with it…"

"*Ryuuko!* "

It was rare for it to attempt to influence her actions directly; it chose precise moments to do so, with simple impulses like making her trip her sister for no reason. And it did now, with her twinge of shock at that very real voice, to make Ryuuko's finger twitch in.

SPLIKT!

"*AAAAAGGH!* "

She was on her back, having toppled off the crate she'd been seated on. And then Satsuki was over her, crying her name, holding her still as Ryuuko writhed, neck straining, eyes straining away, hand grasping at her shoulder. The younger woman kicked and swore.

"Ryuuko - what the hell are you doing-?!"

"I'm taking my fucking MIND back!" Ryuuko cried. "I'm taking myself back - from - th-the *enemy*… !"

Satsuki watched helplessly as Ryuuko sat up with a groan, her arm shivering streadily below the bleeding wound in her shoulder. "This is insane… !" She felt her back - a cracked shoulder blade, and no exit wound. "We need to get the bullet out! Let's get back to the room - or, take a bit of my power and heal it-!"

"Aren't you fucking eager to let me use you, nowadays?!" Ryuuko, who'd been panting, sweating in a daze, had snapped to alertness again. Wincing, she stood, pulling from Satsuki's arms, and jammed her thumb into the wound, squeezing to exacerbate it.

Satsuki watched her fight not to cry. "Ryuuko, stop…"

Weary blue eyes were intense. "I - I'm going. To Honnouji. I have to go right now. Stop looking at the wound and listen!" she growled, seeing Satsuki's look of unease. "I can't die from something like this, remember?! You know it won't leave permanent damage, so stop lookin' at me like I'm crazy!"

Satsuki glowered, bitterly biting back the concern that had just moments prior reached a point of terror. "Fine," she spat, "I'll just *stop* treating you like a human, then! Will that make you better, Ryuuko? Should I go ahead and stop being your sister, too?!"

Ryuuko's cold eyes winced, stung. "I didn't mean…" Trailing off, she shook her head. "How'd you find me? How'd you know to…"

"I saw Senketsu was missing, along with a bag and some of your things. Of course I came to find you," Satsuki said, spotting the shape of the quickly packed bag on the ground nearby. "So we need to leave right now, and there's some reason you wished to be in pain. Okay. Let's go. To Honnouji, correct?"

Ryuuko just eyed her for a moment. She looked away. "It's the only choice *I* have, to go there. But I needed to decide…" she said, face drawn and pale as she casually wriggled her thumb in the wound. "You ain't coming with me, sis."

Satsuki held her eyes evenly. "I'm going."

"You're not."

Satsuki raised a slanted brow. On cue, the air around her seemed to energize.

"Look," Ryuuko said quickly, "You can keep doing a lot of good here. Stay with Inumuta, help these folks, and I'll come back as soon as I can. But I'm *not* draggin' you along when I don't know what I'm getting into!"

"*I'm* not letting my sister wander off alone. Not in the state she's in, and especially not into something that had frightened her enough to make her stay in one place for an entire month," Satsuki retorted.

Ryuuko scowled, pulling her thumb from her shoulder with a squelch. "I'm leaving. You're staying here."

She started to walk past Satsuki.

Satsuki wrapped her arms around Ryuuko's arms and middle from behind - and lifted her up.

"You're not walking out of here alone, Ryuuko."

Ryuuko considered her predicament. Namely, her feet couldn't reach the ground. "Your arms are gonna get tired, eventually."

"You won't hurt me to force your way free. I can hold you up for longer than you think. You're not heavy to me, Ryuuko; you're my sister."

Ryuuko grumbled halfheartedly.

"You can't win this one, Ryuuko." Satsuki's arms tightened. "I won't let you. Knowing that you won't die isn't enough; after all this time, can't you see that I don't simply care about your life? It's the rest of you that needs looking after."

"Sis…"

"Besides - we're far stronger together than we are apart. Our power is in the two of us, together."

Ryuuko's head hung. She took a breath, feeling the warmth of Satsuki behind her. "The strongest team, right?"

Soon Satsuki had penned a message for Takeda, and said a temporary farewell to Houka.

The sisters set out from the stronghold together.

-Limit-

End

- breaking point

Note: The in-chapter Japanese, in the sequence in Ryuuko's mind-space, is unlikely to be perfect. Most of it should be passable, because they're simple sentences/intentionally broken phrases and few complete sentences, but I didn't really check much; and particularly, I have no idea how I'd phrase Satsuki's use of "You child" in Japanese, so I just used the word for child, and will say that it's almost definitely a poor/awkward translation ^^; Anyways, it's the English we really care about here, of course, with the Japanese for dramatic effect.

Interlude: Companion at the End of Days

Chapter 19: Interlude: Companion at the End of Days

"Ryuuko… I've fought alongside you for three years, and I've loved you for three years. And all this time, you may have taught me more about humanity than I could ever have taught you. You've taught me about love… about life… about who I am."

Warning: Sappy.

In seriousness though (well, the story's been M-rated since a few chapters ago, but still -- heads up) This chapter contains the most suggestive content we'll have in the story. That being said, it's nothing graphic; references to sexual acts, and a good bit of sometimes detailed foreplay-type interaction. Still, if you don't want to see it, you won't miss terribly much if you want to skim or skip.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

AT THE END OF DAYS

Interlude Two \ Companion - - At the End of Days

I'm not alone. And I'm really, really happy for that.

But… that being said…

"Is something the matter?" 'Ragyou' asked.

Ryuuko was glad she could still tell when it was Satsuki talking and when the superimposed hallucination was making shit up. But she couldn't exactly stop the enemy from tripping up her eyes and ears to make her traveling companion into the general last person she wanted to see.

"I'm good," Ryuuko said, averting her eyes. It was just a passive, petty sort of trick. The enemy approved of her heading toward Honnouji. It was just trying to annoy her, keep her on edge, really.

"I can use *anything* against you, dear," Ragyou said - still sitting where Ryuuko knew Satsuki was, but this time fabricating the words in her head.

"Say," Ryuuko said, watching their dinner of soup heat over the flame - and promptly perceiving it as a murky green-brown that she wouldn't look forward to eating. She fought not to scowl. "We know I suck at using my ki… but is there any way *you* could manipulate my ki? Like, to skew my mental state, for instance…"

'Ragyou' frowned, perturbed. "Manipulating another's ki is… a tricky affair. I wouldn't know how to directly alter your mental state via your energy, either way. Why do you ask?"

"No, no reason…"

"Why not tell her?" Ragyou laughed.

Ryuuko flopped back in the grass, resting her head on her hands.

'Ragyou' leaned into her field of view, face disorientingly caring in the soft twilight that permeated the trees. Ryuuko looked away as she smoothed stray locks of hair out of her face.

"Oho - you can't even look at her for long, if I do this? And I'm sure it would comfort you *immensely*, to be allowed to see your dear elder sister…"

"Sh…" Ryuuko caught her tongue quickly. *Shut up.*

"Hmm…" Ragyou's drawl went on, no longer with its pretense of kindness. "Perhaps we should see how good *I* am at making you moan, the next time our dear Satsuki is slavering over your sweating body like a whore. And when you so delicately gasp and arc into her touch… when she's rubbing and licking all your sweet spots, leaving you *aching* for release… and when you are finally made to convulse in ecstasy, we'll see whose *name* you scream-,"

Ryuuko sat up sharply, slipping a miniature scissor blade from her belt. She poised the tip at her palm, considering.

"Ryuuko…" 'Ragyou' said, with a familiar note of concern that certainly didn't belong with that face, that voice. And then: "Wouldn't it be amusing if, in that precious voice you save just for 'Onee-san,' you let slip an 'Okaa-san' and she never touched you again?"

Ryuuko took a breath, looking at the blade again, and then at 'Ragyou's' eyes.

"Don't you think she hates it?" Ragyou went on at her side. "How *good* she is at it? Did you ever consider how *impossible* it is for her to truly let herself enjoy humoring your selfish passions? Giving you that which she has only ever received, and received with silent pain and humiliation?"

She was shaking. "It's this," she said stiffly, indicating the trembling scissor, "or you deck me."

"Is the… the 'enemy' attacking you, right now?" Satsuki hadn't been able to glean specifics, but she understood enough about the source of Ryuuko's woes.

"It's always 'attacking' me," Ryuuko answered, eyes straying to watch Yoriyoshi grasp her wrist with a look of concern, while Mako shook her head furiously, lifelike, eyes glittering with withheld moisture. "Sometimes it's just… more unbearable than others…"

Sighing, 'Ragyou' pulled the scissor from her hand and ticked a finger up, motioning for her to rise.

It was uncanny, Ryuuko noted, seeing so many un-Ragyou-like mannerisms on the hallucination that followed Satsuki's moves.

Flat-footed, Ryuuko angled her head a bit, making the clearest possible target of the left edge of her jaw.

There was a handful of quirks she was finding the two Kiryuuin shared, but in most ways, Ryuuko decided, they were drastically different. Ragyou would have emphasized making her every move seem graceful and effortless; Satsuki would always prioritize effectiveness above all else, and achieve grace through precision. It made for some funny incongruities.

Like the way 'Ragyou' squared up across from her in a wide stance, winding back for a hit that slammed Ryuuko clear off her feet.

Hot damn, was she happy to see her sister again.

Happy when Satsuki came wordlessly to her side and sat down, face soft - in spite of the circumstances, apologetic. Ryuuko clasped the hand she offered, showing she was fine.

And maybe even happier when Satsuki's lips pressed themselves to the bruise at her jawline.

Ryuuko's unfocused eyes drifted as long fingers trailed up her palm, her arm, before slipping the hand against her ribcage. Her breath hitched - more so, when Satsuki leaned down to nibble at her collarbone.

Satsuki's movements were slow, and her face serious, as she teased tender flesh intently with her lips and teeth. Her hand slid to find and trace the contours of a modestly toned pack of abdominals, pausing when a mewled whimper wrested its way from Ryuuko's throat.

The long-haired woman rose from her work that had progressed methodically to Ryuuko's neck. Looking a short way down at her sister's flushed face, she offered the question through the subtlest quirk of her brows.

'Yes? No?'

Ryuuko seemed to consider a moment, and nodded. Her hooded eyes shut with a gasp as Satsuki lowered to kiss her neck again, while deft fingers dragged upward on the hem of Ryuuko's shirt.

She was panting quietly for breath; her face had baked itself a deep, rosy shade. The skin of her neck, shoulders, and most of her body felt simmering warm, tender and dotted with sweat.

When Satsuki returned to her field of vision, and squeezed her shoulders with a gentle yet firm, deliberate touch, the momentarily heightened sensitivity of her present state made Ryuuko whine. Another aftershock hit her down low.

Her forearms had been drawn to cross above her head, a position Ryuuko seemed fond of assuming whenever Satsuki began; the long-haired woman now coaxed them down to relax. And when the Kiryuuin neared to claim her delicately parted lips, Ryuuko felt a tiny, shuddering moan build in her hoarse throat as the taste, thick and fresh on Satsuki's lips and tongue, made her cheeks burn anew. The sound went free as she returned the kiss passionately, eager to show her appreciation. Strong hands worked her sore shoulders with care, just shy of causing pain.

"Th-thank you…" Ryuuko rasped when they separated, and Satsuki trailed gentle kisses along her face - at the corner of her lips, the edge of her nose, the flat of her cheekbone, the lid of a wearily shutting eye. No two meetings between these lips and her flesh were exactly the same, she mused; each nudge slipped her a fleeting touch of Satsuki's heart, with tenderness that sent fine pinpricks of

sensation melting, smoldering, into her flesh. The attention told Ryuuko she was safe, secure. "Thank you, Nee-san…"

Satsuki shushed as she settled at her side, a hand brushing back disheveled hair and bracing Ryuuko's head against another kiss to the cheek. The usually stern woman was always sure to be careful with Ryuuko when she was at her most vulnerable. Satsuki would unfailingly use this time - the afterglow of carnal delight, when a docile, melting Ryuuko most yearned to be showered in affection - generously, to indulge the younger woman to warm contentment. "Don't thank me," Satsuki whispered between two kisses, eliciting a small nod. "How… how was it?"

"S-so good…"

Satsuki kissed her again. "My imouto is eloquent," she observed, humor glinting good-naturedly beneath dense brows.

"Leave me alone…" Ryuuko chortled. "Nee-san?"

"Hm?"

"Do you, at all… d-do you dislike doing this? Without gettin' anything in return?"

Satsuki snorted softly. "What's this, suddenly?"

"I wanna know…"

"I like the sounds you make," Satsuki admitted. "I appreciate the expressions you show me only at these times. But the tranquility that comes over you, when it's done… I love seeing you at peace, however briefly. Your happiness is plenty in 'compensation' for me…"

"Nee-san…" She shut her eyes. "I love the… the things ya' do. I get it now; it's *because* it's you. When the softest parts a' me are in your hands, I don't feel weak; I feel safe. Because it's you, I feel *safe* . I can let go, I can lose myself, if it's with you…"

They had wound up embracing each other, lying on their sides, Ryuuko with her head rested on Satsuki's arm. Trailing off, the younger woman hummed under the warm, sluggish press of lips on her brow; a press that told her how much the words had meant to her sister. But when she opened her eyes, she was transfixed by the smooth sweep of ivory skin before her, while Satsuki's grasping fingers played in her hair, massaged her scalp.

"What is it?" the Kiryuuin asked, perhaps so attuned that she had noticed Ryuuko was no longer cooling down.

"It's nothin'," Ryuuko dodged quickly, but she couldn't help but track the faint and alluring motion induced by Satsuki's voice, her breath. She swallowed quietly, and chewed her lip.

"Tell me," the elder sister insisted, the base of her thumb crossing like a feather over the curve of a reddening ear. Ryuuko became serenely still, entranced as the touch passed. The contact was protracted, astonishingly slow for the unwavering yet all but nonexistent depth of it. Ryuuko was quickly, acutely conscious of a balance in which if she were to lean in the slightest bit, she would intrude on a fragile spell as a rock intrudes on a sheet more brittle than glass and finer than foil; shiver away, even accidentally, and she would immediately lose the captivating graze, banish it, delete it, ruin with clumsiness its masterful design. Pinned to this maddeningly delectable precipice, her breath became controlled as she fought not to let a vital act of respiration shake her.

Satsuki hadn't afforded her such stimulation by chance; she proved as much when her thumb gracefully drew away and returned, effortlessly reproducing an already impossible motion, magnifying its thrall. In this way a second such stroke, and a third, served to loosen Ryuuko's lips.

"I… I wanna kiss your neck," she surrendered, helpless. Satsuki was so good at affecting her, it could border on unfair.

"What? Speak up, Ryuuko." Another stroke.

Shit! "I w-wanna kiss Onee-san's neck!"

Ryuuko shrank from the words immediately, breaking the spell, breaking the urgency that had driven her thoughts from her lips. Her eyes shut as she felt Satsuki's breath still. Ryuuko never asked such things - she shouldn't have asked, she shouldn't be pushing her. And not now, of all times. Satsuki would think she was dissatisfied, ungrateful-

"Go ahead," Satsuki said softly, and inclined her chin a few degrees.

Giddy heat cropped up in Ryuuko's face, and in… other regions. But she kept her head on straight. Her companion wasn't someone she'd treat carelessly. "Are you sure? You're cool with it?"

"Yes…" She smirked in attempted humor. "After I coaxed it so carefully out of you, I should hate to turn down such a humble request."

Ryuuko looked up at Satsuki's sealed eyes, then again to the exposed, slender ivory pillar. Tentative, she gave a reassuring pat with her hand that rested at the small of Satsuki's back, and leaned near.

The two had seen each other nude countless times, and did on a regular basis; at this point, the elder was even quite comfortable letting her sister wash or rub her back. But at mundane times, whether bathing, changing clothes, or dressing wounds, Satsuki's body, while attractive, rarely induced arousal in her younger companion. It was generally the same, companionable air when the two huddled or spooned for warmth, without a thought; Ryuuko didn't typically think twice even when Satsuki's ample breasts happened to pillow against her body, or when long legs were intertwined with hers at the end of a cold night.

Yet at times like these, whether when Ryuuko was warming with anticipation or in the midst of the shivering descent from a lingering, stunning high, even a seemingly innocuous touch, to the arm or the

ear, could make her skin sizzle with sensation. At a point that her throat ached from crying out all the things she'd had to hold in in a place where others might overhear, and she'd tasted her own musk on her sister's lips, she was in a far from mundane state of mind.

At a moment like this, in Ryuuko's glittering eyes, even the fine contours of a fully-clothed Satsuki's exposed neck could become something gripping - strikingly, incomprehensibly erotic.

Ryuuko breathed out softly, letting a warm breath greet the creamy, minutely goosebump-riddled flesh. She felt a nervous shiver dart through her companion, and subside. She licked her lips.

When she thought Satsuki was calm, she pressed her lips to her skin.

"*Ah* -!"

The tightening of the hands in her hair - and Ryuuko's response of snapping her head away - occurred in conjunction with Satsuki's chin dropping against Ryuuko's skull, making them both yelp.

"S-sorry!" they shouted at each other, and blinked.

"Pfft…" Ryuuko suppressed it only a moment before she began to laugh, and Satsuki shortly joined her.

"Look, Nee-san," Ryuuko chuckled finally, blinking away a mirthful tear as Satsuki checked the girl's head for a bump. "If it's too soon…"

"No," Satsuki said, curiously adamant. "Try it once more…"

Ryuuko wouldn't turn down an order, just now. But while this attempt indeed proved more successful, she was conscious of the silent tension that soon locked itself in Satsuki's form, in her shaking breath and in hands cradling Ryuuko's head.

"Wh-what is it?" Satsuki asked, at her pause. "G-go on, just - do as you p-please."

"I can't, if you're uncomfortable…"

A stubborn sound. "I'll get over it."

"That ain't the way to do this," Ryuuko insisted. She turned a bit, onto her back, and shifted up against the bag that served for a pillow. "Here - get on top of me again…"

When Satsuki had climbed over her, on forearms and knees resting on either side of Ryuuko's body, Ryuuko started to reach upward. Biting her lip in indecision, she instead voluntarily drew her arms once more above her head, in what had become a gesture of both offer and meek request.

But it was Satsuki who offered now, she supposed, heart quickening again as the Kiryuuin leaned over her. Ryuuko smiled as she drew into reach.

"There… you're still in control, Nee-san…"

There was a hushed gasp as Ryuuko picked up where she'd left off. She was gentle, treating the gift she'd been entrusted with with the utmost care. Her motions were limited, but she made do, pressing her lips a few times into one area, sucking gently over a vein, before shifting to let her tongue play slowly, lightly, at the rounded protuberance of a collarbone.

Satsuki's head tilted away, making her neck flex in a new manner, as her breath pitched, even as she was drawn to the warmth Ryuuko's attention impressed upon her flesh, clashing starkly with the chill of the ambient night air. Ryuuko teased kisses intently along the collarbone now, eyes shut, but remained mindful as Satsuki's breath hastened, and her hand curled tensely into the bag's fabric beside Ryuuko's head.

"Are you getting, k-kinda… y'know, h-… aroused?" Ryuuko asked carefully, opening her eyes.

"I don't know," Satsuki answered honestly, at a whisper.

"Then… I mean, let's stop. If it's too confusing…"

"No… no, don't stop what you're doing, Ryuuko."

Ryuuko obediently planted another pair of kisses, but kept the dialogue open. "Does this feel good?"

"I… think so…"

Ryuuko 'hmm'd patiently, continuing. "Are you afraid?"

"I… don't think so."

"I'm glad…"

Lowering an arm, Ryuuko brushed one of Satsuki's hands unassumingly. Promptly, she purred her approval into Satsuki's neck as that hand's skilled touch found and went to work on her chest.

Ryuuko shifted focus again, kissing the muscle just beside the base of Satsuki's neck. The effect surprised her - a throat tightening on a sound, and an overall *clenching*, of Satsuki's arm that had slipped behind Ryuuko's back, of the hand on her chest, of Satsuki's neck dropping her head over Ryuuko's shoulder, and of her hips, squeezing her thighs outside Ryuuko's sharply. Gasping, Ryuuko pressed again with her lips before venturing to give a playful nibble, barely a brush of her teeth.

"R-Ryuuko!" Satsuki stammered, the breathy exclamation crossed faintly with a note of question.

"Stop?"

"No!"

"More?"

"Unh!" A nod.

"I-is it-" she panted, "-Is it okay t-to- leave a mark?"

"Yes… !"

Ryuuko retained her gentleness as she focused on the spot, lapping and nipping eagerly, but never hard enough to break skin. Satsuki pressed her body flush to Ryuuko's, nuzzling her face into messy hair and panting wispily as she worked.

"Onee-san has a weak spot like this, then?" Ryuuko murmured affectionately, giving a brief respite as she spoke against flushed skin. "I'll be careful with it…"

When she sucked experimentally, she felt Satsuki's hips quake. She caught a small area in her lips and suckled harder, earning a magnified response, and moaned as the hand on her chest answered with another good squeeze.

But…

"S-Satsuki…"

"Huh?" Almost soundless, now.

"Y-you can, I mean - you can make noise, too. If you want to… just let it out. I'm the only one who's gonna hear it, so…"

"I…"

There was silence for a moment.

Silence, Satsuki decided, was the enemy.

"Ryuuko?"

"Yes?"

"T… touch me."

Her eyes grew. "U-uh… whereabout?"

"I don't care," Satsuki answered, and groaned aloud when two opportunistic hands consequently cupped and squeezed her rear.

"Th-there?" Satsuki gasped, the lightness of sudden laughter airing out her voice. "Is th-that where you've - most wanted to- hng!"

"Is this all right?" Ryuuko checked, staunchly resisting an urge to grope any harder as she did. Satsuki's voice, and the way her face scrunched as she grit her teeth, and the just-restrained movements of her body - in combination with the present orientation of Ryuuko's hands - were making it a task for the younger woman to stay focused, but she did, even as her breath fell quick.

Satsuki rocked momentarily at her touch. "Ryuuko… I love you."

"C'mon, Nee-san, talk to me. Is this alright or not?"

A smile. "You've been fighting s-so hard - to make me comfortable. To make it as simple as possible for me to give you what you longed to feel. And you held yourself back, vigilantly, every time. You never asked me for anything more. You never asked to even kiss my neck before today…"

"Onee-san…"

"You made yourself so submissive. You offered me more and more control; you're always thinking about how to make me feel strong and secure. But I couldn't feel comfortable with this - I could never enjoy it, as it was. Because as long as it remained a one-way interaction, I could only see *you* as my old self, and myself as *Ragyou* looming over you!"

"So, if I interact with you… if it's more of a balance…?"

Satsuki nodded. Her voice as she continued was the slightest bit higher, tinier, more vulnerable; yet it was not with distress, as she divulged her words. "I love you, you know? And I *trust* you, Ryuuko. I've fought alongside you for three years, and I've loved you for three years. I think… I think I can let go with you, as well. So lessen your restraint," she said, "and I might just escape mine."

"But, I still…" Ryuuko's confidence faltered. She realized, with some startlement, that too much time had passed since her concussion; she would have healed up completely by now. Yet her head was quiet, her thoughts her own… Still she shook her head. "You *shouldn't* trust me. I-I might never know when I'll become dangerous. I…"

"You're *not* dangerous to me right now, Ryuuko."

"And how're you so sure?" she demanded.

"I believe in you, and so it is certain."

Satsuki shushed as Ryuuko shook her head again, in doubt.

"Ryuuko… All this time, in this broken world, you may have taught me more about humanity than I could ever have taught you. You've taught me about love… about life… about who I am. You helped me remember how to truly laugh. You've shown me… th-that I am loved… !"

Her cheek rested beside Ryuuko's, as she paused on a breath. Her voice remained light. "And I'm so thankful for that! But now… do you balk at holding any power, for fear of misusing it? But, look… You're calm right now, aren't you?"

"Satsuki…"

The elder sister had lifted her head. The moment when her eyes shut with her smile, her expression radiant as her skin shone with no more than the silken touch of young moonlight, might have procured

the purest beauty Ryuuko had ever beheld. The storm inside her couldn't stand up to that.

The sight could have been a small miracle in itself. And Ryuuko knew then that Satsuki was right; nothing could divide them in such a moment as this, and Ryuuko was wholly and perfectly powerless to endanger her.

"I know that *believing* in you is enough…" Satsuki said emphatically, "because I know you won't hurt me, while I embrace you in trust."

Ryuuko's eyes moistened. "G-geez, you…" Her lip trembled, rather pathetically, as a sniffling smile sprawled crooked on her face, buoyed up by the passion, and liberation, bubbling in her chest. Briefly, she shut her eyes. "I… I'm loved, huh…?"

"Yes, Ryuuko. You are loved, and you will always *be* loved. You are precious to me. So, please… If you could share something like this with me…"

Ryuuko's hands showed off some strength, when she squeezed again. The Kiryuuin dropped her head with an audible gasp as her companion's hands worked - and Ryuuko kissed her lips, quick but loving, before breaking into a helplessly clumsy, affectionate grin.

"Onee-san… !"

"Wh-why are you crying, you child?" Satsuki laughed at her expression, before the flustered woman pecked below her jaw again.

"Sh-shut up, dumbass!" Ryuuko jabbed, laughing and gasping, her voice kind. Satsuki's fondling found a rhythm on her chest, and she sighed as Ryuuko's calloused hands slid down her form, rubbing her palms in firm circles over her thighs. They kissed messily now, between panting breaths.

"R-Ryuuko, I - I'm enjoying this. I can enjoy it… !"

"Th-then - go on, Nee-san. The old hag can't stop ya', so let's… y'know, i-if you want…" She gave a lopsided grin. "How 'bout we take back what's yours?"

Yes… I can enjoy this with Ryuuko, can't I? Of course… I can trust you, and you can trust me. Even in a world like this one… As long as I'm alive, I will live out this reality, in all the pain, and all the joy. She sighed as a familiar hand slipped under her shirt, stroking her back.

I trust this person, and I refuse to let anyone else, any enemy, take that trust away from me.

Lips met chastely, then passionately.

Ryuuko… thank you.

-Companion-

End

- "being one in body and soul; of one flesh; two hearts beating as one" (expression)

Alternate titles considered: Intimacy - -; Bonding - -; Bonds - -

A lot of extra rambling you don't really need to read:

It occurred to me that I essentially considered three alternatives for the sexual element of their relationship; across the board, Ryuuko's sexuality was basically a constant, while the variation came in Satsuki's behavior and the extent of the repercussions of her past. That being, there were two experimentally written, alternative 'versions' distinct from the path we took in the story (distinct from the

developments of the previous interlude, of Painkilling, and of this interlude).

One option was a comfortably asexual Satsuki who saw no issue with her lack of sexual interest, and emotionally was more or less unaffected by her past abuse (lacking any notable discomfort with pleasuring Ryuuko); in that draft scenario, it's explained that sometimes, when Ryuuko is in a downcast mood, Satsuki comes to her side and starts fondling her, and if Ryuuko expresses interest, Satsuki carries on further. It's a more reflective type scene; we note that Satsuki doesn't understand Ryuuko's pleasure itself, but can understand that Ryuuko enjoys it because she trusts Satsuki, and Satsuki in turn likes to make her feel good. We don't know how long it's been going on or how frequent these sessions are, but in this scenario, Satsuki's recovery/repercussions in general are mentioned only briefly.

The other alternative (which was never seriously in the running for being included, due to its explicit nature) presented a hypersexual Satsuki who, at unpredictable times, comes on to Ryuuko and initiates their activities; this excites Ryuuko, and 'stuff' ensues. Ryuuko muses to herself that Satsuki's spontaneity borders on bizarre; she can't really comprehend what's going through Satsuki's head at times like these, but perhaps a determination to explore and 'take back' her sexuality, which Ragyou stunted. But Ryuuko, being a more than willing partner for her, happily indulges Satsuki's advances. In this scenario, however, we also leave the concept of 'recovery' ambiguous (is this a healthy enough relationship? Is Satsuki content with the way things are?), and keep it as a reflective look at an aspect of their life together.

With this interlude chapter and the story as it is, I'd say we've gone with the most 'romantic' of the three, and deepened Satsuki's character arc a bit, by actually establishing/following some glimpses of repercussions and recovery, tying it in with her ability to trust Ryuuko, and tying the concept of trust into the fact that she and Ryuuko both see the other as showing them how to be human.

Ancients at the End of Days

Chapter 20: Ancients at the End of Days

Satsuki delves into the deepest secrets of the Kiryuuin, in search of knowledge that might help combat the Life Fibers; beneath Honnouji Academy, Ryuuko confronts the entity that's been contacting her.

A little chapter 17 art of Satsuki and Ryuuko's (onesided) fight is on my dA and tumblr now. I also fixed up the 'ateod' tag on my tumblr, adding it to some of my older posts that were only tagged 'at the end of days' before I switched to using the abbreviation.

As always, note to future readers passing through once more chapters are posted - beware of potential spoilers in these if you're not caught up!

http://kurouga.tumblr.com/tagged/ateod -for story art, WIPs, and random rambling about the story

http://hinata0321.deviantart.com/gallery/55616807/At-the-End-of-Days -for a quicker view of just art

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(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

AT THE END OF DAYS

Twenty \ Ancients - - At the End of Days

When Ryuuko woke, she ran the habitual sensory check of the area. Clear, to a good enough distance not to worry.

That confirmed, she turned her focus to the woman who lay at her side, idly stroking Ryuuko's hair, and smiled. "My bad. I overslept, huh?"

Satsuki shook her head slightly. "I haven't been up long," she admitted, the lingering grogginess in her voice telling the truth of her words.

Ryuuko hummed as the long-haired woman pressed her forehead to hers, fingers massaging her scalp. "How d'ya feel, sis?"

Satsuki smiled contentedly - a soft quirk of the lips that set Ryuuko's mind pleasantly aflutter. "I feel fine." A wry look. "Surely I *look* a mess…"

Ryuuko reached out, hesitating briefly before her hand grazed disheveled hair near Satsuki's face. "You're beautiful…" The younger woman blushed. "I-if it ain't still weird for me to say it."

"I wouldn't believe so. Would you feel less awkward if I told you what a beautiful, overgrown child you are?"

"If you put it like that," Ryuuko whined, play-pouting stubbornly. "Alright then, you're *gorgeous* ." She smiled softly as Satsuki chortled. "Sis, I… I hope it was a good first."

A heavy brow quirked. "'First'…?"

"The old hag don't count," Ryuuko declared firmly. She nuzzled close to her sister, eyes shut. "She tried to make you hers; she thought she could hurt you, break you into whatever she wanted. Of course that doesn't count. Besides, the things she did couldn't drag ya' down, couldn't tarnish that spirit a' yours one bit. You know, and I know - how pure you are."

Satsuki kissed her. "It was a good first, Ryuuko. Don't worry about that. It seems I've now shared my first… with someone I hold very dear."

Ryuuko grinned affectionately as a hand ruffled her hair. "D'you have any idea how beautiful you are, Kiryuuin Satsuki?"

"Oh, stop it. As if I ever needed a ruffian like you to tell me."

You child… Satsuki thought, smiling to the sound of the girl's laughter.

This time… this time, I'll believe you.

Mercifully, the enemy's manipulations grew fewer and fewer as they neared Honnouji.

… *You still there?* Ryuuko wondered hesitantly one morning, suspicious, resting with Satsuki by a creek after a scuffle with a weak, random cluster. They were in the final stretch, now; they'd neatly stocked a bag on food and supplies, and stored excess items, along with Senketsu, in a nearby hideout.

Of course I'm here. But you're being such a good *little ape… Stay on track, and I'll have no need to pull the wool over your eyes any longer.*

Ryuuko gazed into a cloudy sky. *You don't say…*

We'll speak soon, Matoi Ryuuko. And as promised, everything you seek shall become clear. I will tell you the nature of human beings.

You expect me to waltz into a trap.

I know you will. Even if you had a choice in the matter, and your sanity were not the price of resistance… As a human, even anticipating a trap, ultimately you can only sate your curiosity.

She frowned. *But your hold's gettin' shaky, ain't it? And after all the work you put into whittling me down… when it comes down to it, you*

were right about one thing. I am *my own enemy. My self-doubt… without that, you'll have a hard time trying to hurt me, won't you?*

Look at you, so fearless and cleansed of all doubts…

Of course I have doubts. And it's natural to feel fear. But I also have a big sister who believes in me. That's worth more to me than you could ever know.

The enemy was quiet.

Ryuuko glowered into the distance, at the Toukyou skyline. *I've got somethin' to lose, after all… so I won't mess up.*

It was a misty morning - not altogether unlike the dawn on which, in a different era, one angry delinquent had first crossed this bridge in the bay, climbed through the town to the academy on top, and leveled half her scissors at one unimpressed student council president.

It was a different sort of foreboding, now. The lower levels of the town, in now-lifeless disrepair. The tower that had once crowned it all, its supreme ruler's pedestal, was no longer visible in the distance.

Two now stood at the foot of the bridge, hands clasped between them.

"Humanity's final stronghold before the fall," Satsuki reflected solemnly, at Ryuuko's side. "Here we are again…"

[HONNOUJI ACADEMY]

Her cool eyes fell from the peak as Ryuuko gave her hand a squeeze, and pulled away. The younger woman started to walk

forward, thumbs hooking in her pockets.

"Still a bit of a hike to go," she pointed out. Her head turned away only briefly, before her eyes were trained once more on her objective. "I think… I was scared to come back, this time. But now that I'm here, ain't no time to stop moving."

Satsuki sighed. "Are you at least intent on making the usual stop…?"

"You know me," Ryuuko chuckled grimly. "How about you? Thinkin' of tagging along for once?"

"I've said my goodbyes," Satsuki replied, tone softening subtly. "You know that."

Ryuuko nodded, not facing her. Just as well; if she were to be honest, she rather preferred to take this climb solo. "So, then, you're off to…?"

"Yes," Satsuki said. "It's foolishness that I've yet to search for whatever secrets it may hold."

"It's not foolish," Ryuuko said quietly. "Your feelings toward it ain't foolish at all." She paused briefly, still glaring down the road before her, back slightly slouched. "Will ya' be alright there, on your own?"

"I could ask the same of you. But this is also something I need to face alone… We're of the same heart, then, I suppose."

"Hmph… okay, so, meet back here by sunset. If you ain't on time, I'm huntin' you down."

"Back at you, you child."

Ryuuko finally had to take a look back. Turning, she walked over, and wrapped her arms around her sister.

The taller woman patted her back, pressing her lips to her brow a long moment before they parted.

They went separate ways.

"Hey, again. It's me."

Ryuuko fiddled with a loose bit of wrap on her hands, chewing on her lip for a silent moment.

"Things have been… not bad, since last time…?" she scrunched up her face in thought. "Yeah - not bad," she decided in sum. "A little on the rough side lately, but interesting, all in all."

She felt like she could talk for hours, crouched here in the cold field. Ryuuko really had needed this; however bad it hurt, it was still a key to making her calm down.

"… So, then," Ryuuko was saying minutes later, "we met this kid, Yoriyoshi, who… well, I guess he kinda' turned out to be a really advanced Life Fiber system, y'know…" A pause. Her breath rolled into the air.

"Well, yeah, you know I suck at tellin' stories… but anyway, he must've had *crazy* high Life Fiber compatibility - kinda' like you. I wonder if he woulda' been kickass as you in a Goku uniform? Oh, but he was a total stiff - *unlike* you…"

She laughed, halting.

"But… he was a good guy… he coulda' really been one of the good guys. But the Life Fibers got to him, first…"

Ryuuko rested her forehead in her hands, digging her fingers into the roots of her hair and sliding them back along her scalp; she rocked a moment, taking a breath. This hollowness - it never failed to hit her, when she visited alone.

"I've lost so many friends…"

She brushed her hand across a simple *katakana* 1 name on the 'plaque' - a sturdy plate of rubble wedged into the earth. Some three-and-a-half years ago, while Ryuuko had grieved alone, Satsuki had etched onto this plate the memorized name of every body, every student she could identify. And she had laid them to rest.

Ryuuko didn't wipe her face as fat drops of water fell from her chin. She fought to show a smile. "If you were here… I wonder if you'd have kept me from gettin' in so many dumb fights with Satsuki… like, you'd just grab hold of me, and everything would be all right? But this woulda' - all around, it would've been a pretty harsh world for you, huh? A world that woulda' broke your heart…" She grasped at her chest, bunching up the shirt over her collarbone in a shaking hand. "But - me and sis, we're… we're gonna try to make it better. At least good enough that you're gonna look at it and smile. When I see you again, I wanna see you *smile*… !"

She laughed, a blush on her cheeks as her heart warmed up a tiny bit again. "Yeah - I've got loads of reasons to fight, don't I? And I know who the enemy is, now. If ya' been watching, I'm sorry for showin' you such an ugly side of me… but I've decided now. I won't hurt Satsuki ever again."

The woman stood, looking on to wreckage of the Academy.

I wonder… she thought, with one more somber glance for the mass grave.

I wonder… have I absorbed the Life Fibers that ate you? If I had, I'd be able to tell, right?

I'd have to… I could find you inside me, and… what, exactly?

Could I apologize?

Or would I just stop and bask in that light… feel the light of who you are, the same way I felt it every day you were part a' my life?

Her eyes were set on the broken, charred tower of Honnouji.

A bundle of wildflowers stirred in the wind, before the marker of the mass grave, as she adjusted her scarf and walked away.

Goodbye, again.

It's time to make things move.

A solid kick sent the large, elaborate gate rattling open, its rusted locking mechanism shattered. A cloaked figure strode unapologetically through, at a walk.

Once carefully maintained, the courtyard's elaborate gardens and manicured lawns were brown and overrun with weeds. The sculpted make of a grand fountain was cracked and greyed; it was a musty bed of algae and fungal growth. Satsuki felt no grief for the ruin of the craftsmanship, as she stepped over pieces of some statue that had toppled across the cracked, uneven pavement.

She felt no pity for the state of the dusty manor she entered.

The wild disarray of a broken, rundown world suited it better; it had never had any business standing as it had before, white and pristine.

The basement levels of Honnouji Academy went deep.

She wondered for not the first time how far she'd gone. There had been a few ordinary levels with various, mundane purposes - office space, lounges with rotted vending machines. Then laboratories, testing rooms - most related to sewing club business, Ryuuko had figured, poking her head curiously in to many a door. Then there had been flights and flights of stairs. A compass inside her had tugged her along.

Now she stood before a plain lift at its highest floor, already wondering what level of Honnou Town outside she stood even with.

So this is the way, huh?

Yes. You needn't fear.

She frowned. Any other way - practically any but needing to climb a long, narrow passage - and she could have guaranteed herself a quick, clean escape if she needed it.

Satsuki would have called this the point to turn back and rethink things. It wasn't much, but she'd found what she could. Now was the time to make a plan, or at least wait until they could go together.

Ryuuko reconfigured the lift - that being, she tore out the worthless box, that operated on electricity. She stared into the abyss below. The skin of her fingertips and toes prickled with tiny, fibrous hooks.

She began a controlled descent.

Satsuki's steps were purposeful but unhurried down the hall. Stern eyebrows, sharp chins, and cool eyes glared her down from either side as she passed.

The distinctive people in the portraits were Kiryuuin heads - each at around twenty-two years old, Satsuki knew, the clan's traditional age of succession. Each rendition was so lifelike, Satsuki mused that an ordinary person might buckle and turn tail before reaching the end of this hall.

She merely surveyed her progenitors with scorn as she walked. *Each one of you… a loyal servant to Life Fiber will. You agreed to forsake humanity. You carried out your tasks dutifully, even over the generations that Life Fibers waited in dormancy.* Yet each one smiled, cool and intent.

Satsuki paused at the final portrait.

It was strange, to stand eye to eye with her mother at about the same age Satsuki was now. A face so like hers, but smiling a sultry, ambitious smile for what lay ahead. *So happy within your cage…* Satsuki's scowl grew pronounced.

"Were you so content to wallow in glorified servitude? The Life Fibers groomed our family meticulously… just as you once sought to groom me."

This loftily smiling woman, in her fanaticism, could only have realized that another Kiryuuin was the only human who could threaten her.

-"*My sweet Satsuki… you need only entrust yourself to me. I will release you from impurity, and you will be sculpted to perfection…*"-

Teeth clenched, she looked disdainfully away from Ragyou, and back down the hall. So many portraits, and space for so many more. Yet Satsuki knew that the family tree was nearly as linear as this hallway; more than one child was rare in the line, and the occasional branches that did sprout had been strictly monitored - and when deemed necessary, pruned with extreme prejudice, by adherence to the codes of the clan. None had been permitted to flourish naturally.

"The guaranteed alpha of the beast called humankind, pinned so tightly under a cloth thumb… Such a human, standing freely, is the most terrifying thing in the world to them, isn't it?"

No - an uncontrollable power scared them, but such a power actually standing *against* them truly terrified.

It stands to reason… Satsuki thought, looking to the end of the hall, *that Ryuuko and I, standing against you, are the most dangerous beings in the world to you, now.*

Each of the Kiryuuin heads had been trusted to protect the Life Fibers. Satsuki could only imagine that the job demanded knowing

every secret of their liege… every weakness they needed to conceal. Had the Cocoon Sphere Genesis only been set to take place a few years later, Satsuki might have by now been privy to her ultimate enemy's every vulnerability.

The answers… are in here.

At the end of the corridor, she opened the glass case atop a pedestal. Years ago, an alarm would have sounded immediately; traps might have sprung, for removing the leatherbound, gold-trimmed volume inside. Nothing stopped her now.

As did the followers of many religions, the Kiryuuin kept a sacred text. A text that only the worthy were permitted to behold. Ragyou had once warned her the words inscribed here would shatter any impure soul foolish enough to look upon it. Satsuki did not believe her, of course; though she held mild fears that perhaps it would be laced with poison, or Life Fibers tucked away in a hidden compartment might try to strike out at an unauthorized reader.

Satsuki examined it carefully; its back, its front, its binding. Slender fingers trembled momentarily, and she opened the cover.

She turned pages, flipping through.

… *A replica.*

She stuffed the blank book into her bag, striding back up the hallway.

Her hand slipped onto the Bakuzan Gako's hilt.

Ragyou's portrait split in two, decapitating its subject with a thud as Satsuki passed it again.

"Is that you?" Ryuuko asked, glaring warily into the darkness before her. The path at the bottom of the elevator shaft had led to a room, some manner of shelter; a far wall had been broken down and

tunneled out, probably by non-human means. She now stood in an earthen cavern of uncertain size, feet testing the uneven ground. A glow of heaped Life Fibers was all she could make out, and vaguely at that; but she felt its signature surely, as peculiar a resonance as it was.

Yes… Come a bit closer, would you? While I try to get these vocal chords in order…

No, thanks, Ryuuko thought, not taking her eyes off the… whatever it was, as she fished a flashlight from her bag. *I'm fine right over here.*

The switch clicked, giving a flicker of light and dying. She swore.

"Oh?" The voice in front of her was a low, croaked rasp; an array of sickening sounds, and a grating, cleared throat.

Then it was familiar.

"Ooooh, *that's* better! Can you hear me, Ryuuko?"

Ryuuko staggered back in haste, dropping the useless flashlight, hands fumbling on small scissor blades before she poised them at full size before her. "Y-you?!"

"Relax, you big silly! The Primordial One kept my brain operating, yeah, but I'm hardly in any state to play with lil' old you anymore! Lookit!"

"Agh-!"

Heat flared behind Ryuuko's eyes, piercing, twisting. Then it was done, and her vision had been tweaked to just the filter to identify what had spoken to her.

The head sat upon a pulsing bed of knotted Life Fibers, fused deeply to them, with crimson veins patterning the translucent face. Yellowed teeth formed a deranged grin beneath a button nose, and a glowing, solid Life Fiber eye was paired with an empty socket. Hair, brittle like

straw and streaked with random red, still sat in two now-limp, tangled pigtails.

"H… Harime… !"

Ryuuko started as she watched a shuddering hunk of the Life Fiber cluster bulge and distend - with air. It deflated to push sound through the reconstructed windpipe, and a mouth that moved stiffly in a face half-drained, half-bloated.

"Yep! The Primordial One is *super* smart! It snagged me real quick after you hurt it. Well, it kinda fried what was physically *left* of me to force a link through my Life Fibers, but I was just about screwed when *you* were done with me, anyway! So, it needed to integrate a human brain to get an idea of how to cripple modern society - how else d'ya think the Life Fibers across the world coordinated so quickly to knock out power plants, internet and communications, and messed up military bases so quickly? From there it was simple; with even one brain to make sense of it for them, what one fiber learned, all learned. So in no time at all they knew exactly what to look for, where to strike…"

"It *is* the whole world, then…"

"Of course! You should thank my little ol' brain - if other countries had had time to pinpoint the source of what was making people get swallowed up by their clothes, and had any sort of government or military capacity left, this whole island2 would've probably been blown sky high with you and me and everyone else left on it, treaties be damned-!"

Light pulsed across the fibers veining Nui's skull; her grotesquely smiling lips twitched.

"*That's enough of her,"* it now said, still with Nui's voice - and to a lesser extent, even her tone. It paused momentarily, adjusting. *"Matoi Ryuuko… What do you wish to know?"* it asked, all traces of Nui's prep and pomp now suppressed.

Ryuuko frowned, calming herself with the strength of her grip on sturdy scissor handles. "I was thinking… about your flaw. I think I found it."

"*Oh? Let's hear it. I will speak only the truth to you, now that you have come to me.* "

Ryuuko considered for a moment. "You just supported my idea again, actually. You were stuck in Nui's speech pattern just now - and you're only preserving her because you needed a humanlike brain to work with, to plot your counterattack. I'll bet it's how you've been able to hack into my mind so effectively, too. A brain comes in handy, don't it?"

"*So?* "

"There's more. When you talk in my head, you have to draw on my own experiences, my own mind and imagination. You can't even fabricate a voice without using either my own, or voices I've heard before. But you mocked humans as 'changing creatures,' and called yourself perfect, saying that's why you ain't changed in all the ages you've been here. You've got the exact same form, spread across galaxies without a drop of diversity, don't you?"

Nui eyed her blankly, if it could be called eyeing. Finally the false lung swelled, and the mouth moved. "*This is true.* "

Ryuuko nodded. "And you cast your limitations as 'perfection' because the fact is you *are* flawed, and you know it. It ain't your choice or anything - you're actually *unable* to evolve on your own, aren't you? That's why you force host species to evolve to accommodate you!

"And you don't just *need* to leech our minds, and our life force, either," she went on. "You're suckers for it. Somethin' about your little Humanform Weapon had been bugging me for a long time, and I finally figured it out. The Fusion cannibalized Yoriyoshi's speech patterns, as expected, but what didn't make sense was that you'd

suddenly take such an interest in some humans' religion. You *loved* the thought, didn't you? The thought of applying it, and gloating, and marveling at your place in it. And you were influenced so strongly, your weapon got stuck ranting in the style of the doctrines of their faith. As soon as it integrated the spirits of so many of zealots, Yoriyoshi's Fusion was helplessly obsessed with imposing the ideology they'd shared!"

Ryuuko held the red eye's gaze squarely.

"And that was about as ideal as you could've hoped for, wasn't it? Your weapon would propel itself to carry out your will without you doin' much of anything, and with nothing but Yoriyoshi's resistance to bog it down."

"*So - what significance do you see in all this?"*

"Your limitations," Ryuuko said. "It's plain as day. *You* need a purpose, too - more'n just surviving and reproducing. Life Fibers can get as hung up on finding one as humans can. And when you absorb us, you learn - through us *changing* creatures, you experience things you can't feel on your own. I felt so much, when I absorbed Yoriyoshi and every soul you'd stored away in him, but it didn't overtake me. I'm my own self; that's the difference between us and parasites like you. And it's why I'm sure we can fight you."

"*Oh?"*

"The Kiryuuin's evolutionary advantage. Once me and Sis figure out how to manipulate it, we'll destroy you. I'll bet we can even use it to overcome that 'flaw' of ours, can't we? The submission gene that's so strong in our blood has to be there to control something otherwise uncontrollable in us. But if we tap into the uncontrollable, even that programmed flaw won't stand a chance of stopping us."

There was silence for a moment. Then a shriek of laughter pealed from Nui's throat.

Satsuki couldn't have said why she paused at the door of the grand bath, gazing dispassionately into a skylit white room with marble sculptures and mildewed tile. A detestable place.

-"*The Kiryuuin are the Life Fibers' proudest, vilest creations…"*

"*V-vile…?"*-

One of countless memories of her acquaintance with powerlessness. She stopped, feet bare on the tile at the edge of the empty pool, and watched a girl struggle not to squirm. Her mother's face was clear and intent, always smiling, without a hint of remorse. Inevitably, the girl's face was indistinct. Dully Satsuki watched the unchangeable scene play out, not quite recalling its content until she reached it.

-"*Yes… We are born 'imperfect,' you see. Unlocking our power to shepherd the masses requires that we possess, and master, the ability to access and bend the human energy typically reserved for the Life Fibers' rightful utilization."*

"*U-unh… ah… !"*-

It was so long ago. The girl in the pool had learned better than to resist, but hadn't yet mastered the control to withhold her voice, a fact that had sickened her to no end at the time… It had made her want to cry, some nights - when she was alone, rigorously broken, and almost lost sight of her purpose.

-"*But even more so… we possess powers that could threaten the master. This is a grave sin…"*-

Satsuki's eyes snapped wide.

-"… *could threaten the master…"*-

I knew it… I knew it!

"What's so funny?!"

"*Foolish child!* " Nui's construct grated out, harsh. "*Certainly, those called Kiryuuin have traits you find beneficial - charisma, enhanced strength, and abundance of bioenergy. You are, after all, the product of our selectively focusing the finest genes in the ancestral human race… but have you not said all along that 'perfection' exists given a* ***creator*** *to define it?* "

"What're you saying?"

"*You seek to determine your 'advantage,' and overcome your 'flaw.' Most pitiable of creatures! In your 'flaw' lies PERFECTION!* "

It was another strange, somehow intimate thought - to picture a harbinger of destruction, on what would have been one of the world's final evenings, perhaps lounging on this ornate bed and simply poring contently over psalms.

Yet here the tome was - not in the private study, but on the bedside nightstand in the manor's expansive master bedroom, as one might keep a holy book close, to cherish its offer of wisdom and peace.

Satsuki had visited this room on rare occasions - called here far more infrequently than she was to the bath. Standing here had always brought her a sense of dread. She had maintained contact with eyes that gleamed with lust, even as those eyes brazenly raked over Satsuki's physique; and she'd reported in a steady voice, while Ragyou deliberately postured herself suggestively across the fine sheets, long fingers prodding and caressing the silk in slow, methodical strokes. But Satsuki's silent fear, that her company would be 'requested' in this luxurious bed, had never come to pass. Perhaps Ragyou had simply relished in the terror she effected on her, however well Satsuki concealed it.

Shaking her head, she strode to the nightstand, and seized the book.

"No… !"

"*Yes - our 'perfect' and your 'perfect' are quite different things. Did you never consider this?* We *groomed you from savages. We created you! We are your GOD!"*

Stern eyes traversed the old text that had been scrawled in the hand of the first Kiryuuin head. Its paper had since yellowed with the trace oils of countless sets of hands. The woman thumbed through, careful of the worn binding.

Her hands began to shake.

"*What is an advantage, but that which we have isolated and honed to make you so exquisitely suited to our ends? The 'finest' genes we selected in the ancestral human race were the genes of those creatures most POWERLESS to resist us!!"*

"Bastard," Ryuuko snarled, "You said you wouldn't lie here!"

"*Are you so afraid of confronting your ignorance? Of opening your eyes to the true extent of your delusions?"*

"I told you - the harder you work to deceive us, the more vigorously we'll search out the truth. The more you try to beat us down, the more we learn of the threat we pose. You're afraid! The one thing that can *destroy* you is the thing you'll focus on the most. We're dangerous, and you're afraid - as afraid as Ragyou was of Satsuki!"

The old tome hit the floor with a crack, pages scattering in the dust.

Satsuki folded a hand over her mouth. Eyes wide and mad, she embraced herself with the other arm as her shoulders quaked, as tightness crushed her throat from the inside.

"*Your strength is not to fight us, but to FEED us! You know this, Matoi Ryuuko!* "

"No. We're strong! We can-!"

A force snapped through her body like an electric shock, buckling her knees. Her hands, shuddering, pinned themselves to the ground as if bolted there. "Wh- what?!" she cried, struggling to move. "No - what is this?! You fucking tricked me-!"

Her throat and lungs tightened, crushing her breath until she gasped in pain. *My Life Fibers…?!*

"*As a beast in this world, you must always know how to recognize your master. This close to me, given your present saturation, the Life Fibers in your body finally recall their proper alignment… They would even die with their host, if ordered to.* "

Y-you son of a… ! She wheezed, unable to form words aloud. *You told me not to dawdle - but I did, and I absorbed so many clusters in the last month…*

"*Hmm… Human children have a game known as rock-paper-scissors, correct? If I tell you I will choose 'rock,' you will assume I lie, and rather than play 'paper' you will select 'rock' yourself. You could say that anticipating this, I told you what I did because I intended to select 'paper' from the start. Do you suppose I lack the intellect to one-up you in the likeness of a children's game? You are so tragically predictable…"*

Ryuuko's mouth hung open, as her vision swam.

So she had wandered here.

The great door before her led to the walkway to the cavern that had once housed the Primordial Life Fiber. She had known as much for years before the day she'd first been allowed to enter.

Before that day, she had sometimes gazed at a mural engraved elaborately across the outer door.

A childlike form, stooped and bowing. The rising of the sun. An adult, standing tall and radiant, as the Life Fibers' equal.

That had been her interpretation. She had seen in the engraving a symbol of Kiryuuin power, and taken heart as she had grimly bided her time for the day she, too, would mature into such strength, and wield it as no Kiryuuin before her had ever dared.

The fibrous construct across from Ryuuko was squirming, rising up, spreading in slithering tendrils along the earthen wall as it made Nui's mouth work.

"*You believe you've crested the apex of humanity, and that as such, the* best *of humanity simply* must *have the power to overthrow us. You are wishfully fooled. Your foot digs down not at a summit, but no higher than the* brink *of the point at which you might humor us a challenge. We would never be so foolish as to allow* livestock *to evolve to a point at which it might legitimately threaten us."*

It was scoffing, coldly, as Ryuuko fought to raise her bowed head, to draw a new breath.

"*Struggle as you please. We* engineered *you, and left you 'flawed' - seated beside a precipice over which we might* drop *you as we deem fit."*

Her hands refused to support her, as she tried to rise; she toppled onto her side, heart hammering uselessly in fear to send stale blood racing through her veins.

"*You were* ***born*** *to crawl. And now you mere, ugly creatures, born to one purpose, presume in your crawling that you must stand so powerfully grown!"*

Her teeth ground until they bled, cracked. "H-humans - a-are just…" She turned her head a bit, getting her mouth off the floor. "Humans are… s-still… just *fine* as they are!" She pushed into a crouch, fuming. "In your 'flawed' creations were some of the finest friends I've ever known! And the best big sister an idiot like me could hope for!"

She reached full height with a suffocated cry, brandishing the scissor blades.

"Yeah, we all got our screws loose, but I love them! So I'll fight! Even if you say it's impossible, I'll fight for the ones that're left! Wantin' to protect them is human nature-!"

Two spears of thread snapped forward at her - sending the scissor blades clanging off into the darkness at her back. Then, like some grotesque spider, the growling heap of fibers leaped the ten meters between them, thudding into Ryuuko and latching tightly onto her half-paralyzed body.

"*Nature?"* Nui cackled through jagged teeth, deformed head morphing out of the clinging mass again to butt foreheads with the wide-eyed Ryuuko. *"That's right! I didn't tell you the real kicker, did I? You wanted to know aaaall about your nature-!"*

Ryuuko's fist swung around - caught short, by a web of fibers stretching from her own back, cruelly skewering, weaving into her arm, encircling her wrist. The fist cracked into her own face, stunning, before the arm was wrenched around and pinned behind her back, hand locked against her other hip and pulled until her shoulder seared.

"*You talk high'n mighty, but you get this crazy strong urge to hurt humans, don't you? An urge you let loose on your poor big sister!"*

It had employed Nui's tone again, cheerful, mocking as Ryuuko struggled. It switched modes again, booming and harsh.

"*You believe it is malice we incur in you - a need to exterminate your own kind. Foolish, Matoi Ryuuko! Life Fibers grant you one thing only: POWER!"*

"Stop!" Ryuuko hacked, as fibers pierced her skin everywhere they touched, forcing themselves on her, invading her flesh, her lungs, bones, spine-

"*Are you listening? Think, and remember what you felt…"*

Her eyes watered as heat drilled through her skull - the sensation of power, as Satsuki lay bloody beneath her-

"*That? **That** was a **human** heart's obsession with superiority, offended at the thought of **lesser** existences daring to stand against you!"*

"No! NO!" Her feet dug down as it wrenched, making her lurch forward. The seemingly small cluster she'd first seen had concealed a passage beneath it; the body of the thing attacking her still stretched back there, linked to who knew how large a mass of Life Fibers.

The Primordial One's remains, she realized in shock. It wanted to assimilate her.

"*Do you understand now - how alike we are? Humans are my children. As a human wielding but an ounce of my strength, surely you know for yourself why I laugh at your farce of resistance!"*

It was constricting, drawing greedily on her energy, her heart-

"*Your dream of wielding my power as a champion of humans is a joke. **Because** you are human, you **thirst** to stand above other humans! You **burn** to boast of your enormous power, lest any should question, in either temerity or foolishness, that **you** are the RULER!"*

"You're WRONG!"

"*Accept it! You are the same brand of **monstrosity** you fear in me…!"*

It was in her head - bliss, and a promise of terrible power-

"*You need look no further than three and a half years ago for the proof!"*

Prying callously at a sealed memory - it felt like her brain was being driven open by a wedge, as more and more fibers penetrated the base of her skull, sticking insatiably into her flesh and bonding to her nerves-

"*Come on, Ryuuko-chan!"* Nui squealed as they lurched another meter toward the pit. *"Let us take you! Become part of the master, like me, and we can be one forever and ever!"*

The memory - it's almost been extracted - it burns, it sickens, she doesn't want to look, anything but that day-

-"*Mako… MAKO!"-*

"*Let it take you! Being worn by it feels so amazing, you'll never know icky pain like that again-!"*

With a yowl, Ryuuko's ki exploded outward. She thrust out her arms as the main mass of the clinging Fibers was scattered away from her with the blast; then she spread her feet while she was free of its interference, and sank into a stance.

She struck the air before her sharply - drew back the palm, and swept it across the space before her.

The swirling cluster pooled itself about Nui's head as it bounced from the wall, and sprang for Ryuuko with a screech.

The punch of Ryuuko's trailing hand met Nui's skull squarely, sending a ripple through it and a good length of the mass behind it. A twisted grin warped itself further, Fiber-eye swelling.

The room was splatter-painted with violently scattering blood.

Ryuuko panted as a length of the Fibers still visible, albeit frayed and scorched at the ends, retracted into the pit, into a space that glowed intensely with power.

She turned tail and ran. She wasn't sure she'd ever stopped running.

-"*One day, I will need to present you to the Ancient, and show you the source of it all. When I do… an impure successor will not be tolerated in its presence."*-

"Fear… is freedom."

A boy who had balked at the thought of fighting back. A weapon, marveling at its miraculous power, rampaging as it pleased.

"Subjugation is liberation."

Ryuuko kneeling before Satsuki, comforting her with the gesture of submission. Ragyou, once wielding the greatest power a human had ever known, and commanding it under her own will.

"Contradiction is truth."

'Flaw.' 'Advantage.' 'Perfection.'

The image on the wall.

'Purity.'

"And *hope*… is *blindness* ."

A small, shaking sound, as if of pain, and she fell to her knees and wept bitter tears.

-Ancients-

End

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1. Unusually, Mako's given name is (in canon) written in katakana, a phonetic system, rather than kanji which have a reading and meaning.↩

2. Referring to Honshuu, the largest and most populous island of Japan, not to Honnouji Academy's small island in Toukyou Bay.↩

Ghosts at the End of Days

Chapter 21: Ghosts at the End of Days

There's no running away anymore.

Since I found out how to insert images, chapters 1, 3, 5, 7, 9 (lol, I didn't even notice the numbers there) and 17 have had relevant illustrations added to them, though most have been edited/cropped from their full versions. I figure I've got all this story art, might as well ^^; I also replaced the header of chapter 1 with the logo, which I think I'll start doing for every chapter; but let me know if there are any issues!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

[img: http://orig01.deviantart.net/bbe0/f/2016/007/7/a/at_the_end_of_days___logo_by_hinata0321-d9n1u4n.png]

Twenty-One \ Ghosts - - At the End of Days

Satsuki's boots had spent the better part of an hour wearing down the grass at the foot of the bridge before she seated herself on a rock, trying not to fidget in the fading twilight. Her foot tapped impatiently.

There was no reason Ryuuko should have taken the entire day, surely? Satsuki had had farther to travel. But this was the meeting place. She could only cause confusion by abandoning it prematurely.

When the last of the daylight was fading, and Satsuki was preparing to march on Honnouji - that was when Ryuuko appeared. As if she'd been putting it off right up to the deadline.

That was probably the case.

Still, Satsuki couldn't be irate with her, as she'd halfway hoped to be.

The girl's morose visage lifted to her sister; she stopped walking only when the long-haired woman, running up to her, wrapped her tightly in a wordless hug, hunching enough to rest her chin on Ryuuko's shoulder.

After several moments, Ryuuko folded her arms around her in return.

They knew without any discussion, then, that neither trip had gone well.

"You're freezing," Satsuki scolded softly, pulling away.

"… Yeah," Ryuuko agreed numbly, looking down at her hand.

Soon enough Satsuki had started a campfire. She didn't have the heart to call Ryuuko out on her lack of effort to assist her. The girl didn't look prepared to channel effort into much of anything.

Beaten, Satsuki thought, peering at the younger woman's idle gaze across the fire. *That's how you look right now, Matoi Ryuuko.*

You look the way I feel.

And… how do you truly feel, I wonder?

"Ryuuko…"

"I'm home, huh?"

Satsuki blinked at the sudden remark, but nodded in agreement, smiling sadly. "Yes… welcome back." *Thank you, for coming back to*

me.

Ryuuko lowered her head again. "… I thought if I could find the enemy and beat it, I'd be fine. I thought I could stop the pain… but there are still scars, huh?"

"That's inevitable," Satsuki said. "I… I've come to accept that there's no shame in it." *You helped teach me that; you opened your arms to me as I learned to cry. So, surely you can…*

"But if it got to me, it won, right?" Ryuuko said, wincing. "If I say it affected me, and that I'm still messed up after it's gone, does that mean I let it w-win?"

Satsuki shook her head, standing as the girl's voice grew tight. "I don't care who won or who lost, Ryuuko. I just want you to talk to me. I can't help you with the pain if you won't talk to me!"

"You're shaken up, too, aren't you? Probably no one else would even be able to tell. Cause all the hurt just rolls off, for you, don't it? Bounces off that shiny castle in your mind or somethin'? But apparently all I got in my head is a heap of kindling," Ryuuko sneered, bitter, and averted her gaze. "… It ain't fair."

"Not *fair* ?" Satsuki's teeth ground. Her voice was low, but curbed just short of becoming sharp. "I can think through the pain; you already know that doesn't make me impervious to it. And I know what it's like, to feel weak. Do you think it was *easy* to build up this castle? Would you suppose I did so for the fun of it?"

Ryuuko declined to respond.

Satsuki took a steadying breath. She would have to take Ryuuko up on her promise in the morning, whether or not she herself had the energy to.

But it was true that the castle of her mind wouldn't fail her; the greater her need for it, the stronger it stood. She could at least stay

steadfast for Ryuuko, for now.

Morning arrived quietly.

Not planning to remain there long, they hadn't gotten particularly settled the previous night; when they rose a fair while after waking, they sat on the bedroll and munched hardtack and canned fruit.

"So," Satsuki said, physically tensing in distaste at the blow she dealt to the silence. There was virtually no cleaner way to start the discussion. One word, quiet as it was, felt like it held all the force, and grace, of a truck veering into a rollover, for the depth of the silence it crashed through.

"So," Ryuuko echoed, toneless, around a dry mouthful she'd been working on for a half-minute already. A car plowed into the truck. At least the silence was lifting.

Head low, Satsuki frowned, glancing at her hunched sister from the corner of her eye. There was little question Ryuuko's trip had held greater risk, after all. "… Did it… did it hurt you?" She wished she had a clue what sort of 'it' she spoke of.

"Do I look hurt to you?"

"I don't *know*," Satsuki said quietly, a sting nipping uncomfortably at her throat. "I don't know anymore, Ryuuko."

The younger woman finally looked at her, softening slightly, though her frown - one that seemed to warn perpetually of a grimace - remained unchanged. "Sis…" She looked away, bitter, as if there was a foul taste to be found in their flavorless fare. "No… no. I didn't let it hurt me." *Though I had to hit it with one'a those hand grenades I'm stuck lighting candles with…*

A breath of muted relief. Ryuuko looked up as she felt a hand give a gentle squeeze above her knee. "I'm glad."

Satsuki didn't dare let the silence stretch beyond a minute, this time.

"It's time to talk to me, Ryuuko."

"This couldn't wait 'til after breakfast?" was the dull complaint.

Satsuki grasped her forearm as Ryuuko scooped a large spoonful of diced pear. Ryuuko glared defensively at her, cowering. Her teeth clenched, eyes wincing as if in the mere dim sunlight that beat down through the clouds, as syrup dripped from the spoon and onto her thigh.

"After breakfast?" Satsuki answered, stern. "I gave you the night. It was supposed to be 'after Honnouji.'" Her lip wrinkled, but she held firm. "Do you plan to lock me out again? I thought you understood that you can trust me! If not now, *when* ? After breakfast? After we reach the hideout? After we pack up again? Or after we travel all the way back to the stronghold?"

Ryuuko's hand shook. She quickly escaped Satsuki's gaze. "I…"

She swallowed dryly.

"I… can't go back there."

Satsuki's eyes grew briefly. "And why is that?"

Ryuuko stood, drawing away from the gentle hand on her knee. She shook her head, frown finally stretching into a scowl, and strode away.

"Ryuuko!" Satsuki snapped. She stood, following her onto the bridge. "Ryuuko! If not there, where are we going?"

"We, we, *we*," Ryuuko muttered. "Always 'we,' ain't it?" she asked, glowering back Satsuki's way.

The long-haired woman froze. Something had impacted the castle wall with unusual force. "What're you…?"

Ryuuko cringed at her look. "I can't deal with this…"

Satsuki grasped her shoulder. "You will *talk* to me about this, Ryuuko! *Now!* "

Ryuuko held her glare combatively for several heartbeats, before looking away, stubbornly mute.

She started in shock as Satsuki grasped the neck of her shirt, yanking her in and lifting her roughly to her toes. Forehead an inch from Ryuuko's - eyes narrowed, seething silently, as the younger woman bristled.

Ryuuko quirked a brow, dangerous. "Easy there, princess…"

Her hand clenched slowly into a fist, knuckles popping deliberately with the move.

Satsuki's shove made her reel; when Ryuuko caught her footing, and put up her fists, the Kiryuuin squared her own stance.

"This coulda' waited 'til after breakfast," Ryuuko snarled, beckoning.

Satsuki sprang.

Ryuuko tensed, began to shift in reaction - and paused.

THWACK!

The short-haired woman hit the ground unceremoniously, sliding to a stop. Satsuki glared down at her, questioning.

"Are you…" Ryuuko touched the back of her hand to the swelling patch of blue on her cheek. She looked up. "A-are you fucking crazy?!" she screamed. "I can't fight you anymore!"

"Ryuuko…"

Ryuuko's breath caught sharply.

Her head swiveled to the side. "Wh-?"

Such was the moment before the bridge exploded beneath them.

Thrown by lurching stone, Satsuki flipped backwards in the air and landed lightly on her feet - blades drawn, deflecting a heavy, sailing chunk of concrete she couldn't quite sidestep. She staggered back, straightening as a writhing mass of black-red threads surged up before her, stretching tendrils of itself onto the broken edges of the bridge. And it kept rising, until the amorphous mess stretched twenty meters into the air. Swirling, collapsing on itself, and reforming again, it gave a murderous scream.

Satsuki's gaze snapped forward. "H-how did you *not* sense this?!"

"I don't know!" Ryuuko cried in bafflement, rising from where she'd fallen on her backside. "I mean - there's obviously something wrong with this one!"

Satsuki gritted her teeth. A considerable gap, and this monstrosity, separated her from her sister.

Ryuuko's scissors stood wedged in the dirt, back by their obliviously crackling campfire, a ways off from Satsuki's side of the bridge.

This thing… couldn't have separated us intentionally? Satsuki wondered, watching it glow with power. It cracked open the crumbling semblance of a dripping, fibrous, half-substantial maw, and bellowed a furious, earth-shaking roar. With this it twisted itself upward, contracting as it did, shuddering as several dozen small spots on its surface glowed - and fine lances of Life Fibers shot out in all directions, each strong enough to shatter stone where it struck.

Landing from a leap of evasion, Satsuki sprinted to the side, spinning to hack apart skewers in a wild flurry of sword work as they neared; she slid to a halt as the straight spears retracted, sharply as a frog's tongue, back to the main body. *Its strikes - so heavy!*

It attacked once more, sending dozens of spears now arcing out on either side, whirring with speed as they homed for two targets. The long-haired woman spun sharply, blades flashing about her low stance as severed fibers scattered away; it lashed out randomly, and she leapt back as battered sections of the bridge went crashing into the water below. Across the gap, Ryuuko was swinging with crimson-clawed hands, furiously fending off strike after strike.

Satsuki chanced to focus then on the writhing main body of their foe; shimmering waves of iridescent light, electrically red, crackled across its dark form. *Even if I could reach it, where the hell would I strike?!*

"Ryuuko-*!* " She grunted, leaping aside as a great tangle of Life Fibers swatted for her, smacking another hunk of the bridge into the churning waters below. "Ryuuko! How many cores?!"

"Like - like, thirty, or - no, thirty-five-ish? Shit!" Twisting awkwardly, she narrowly deflected a strike. "Somewhere 'round there!" was her conclusion.

"*Thirty-five* ?!"

"Damn it! I'm comin' over!" Ryuuko shouted, stretching out a hand. Unraveling claws morphed smoothly into five lines of thread, shooting forward to snap about the railing on Satsuki's side - the nearer land side - of the bridge. She leapt with the sharply pulling threads, launching herself forward.

Until a mass of fibers, branching sharply off the nearest side of the great cluster, snapped in the likeness of a colossal fist about the threads guiding her. It yanked upward with a savage cry; a hunk of railing and stone broke free on one end of the lines, while on the other, Ryuuko was swung uncontrolled through the air. She screeched as it pulled to retract the fist, with Ryuuko, toward its body.

The reddened veins on Ryuuko's free hand flared up to her elbow - and her entire hand surged into the form of a spear, which she thrust

madly into the oncoming surface.

It was like a toothpick rammed into the hide of a large beast. Still, the enemy gurgled and shrieked, convulsing in rage.

The snarl on Ryuuko's face fell. *Wh… what is…?* She looked up as a space on the bleeding surface, above her spear-hand, squirmed, rippled, and snapped open into the form of a massive, angry red eye trained intently on her face.

"Ungh!" Her hand - the thing was latching in with its own fibers, trying to integrate hers that'd stabbed it. Feet braced as well as they could on its writhing form, she fought for one moment before a spot on the surface, just before her, glowed and lanced straight for her heart.

She twisted, screaming aloud as it ran her shoulder through, spraying blood out into the air behind her.

Another mass spilled outward and rose above her; it carried the monstrous, lolling eye with it as it twisted sloppily into the shape of a draconic, fanged mouth before diving hungrily for her.

A stone crunched harshly into the eye, causing the thing's whole form to shriek and contort.

"Over here!" Satsuki challenged, her hand still outstretched, her teeth bared and aura fierce. While its focus was disturbed, Ryuuko wrenched to tear her bleeding arm free, hacked through the skewer in her shoulder, and kicked desperately away, launching herself backwards toward the bridge and Satsuki.

Satsuki caught her about the waist, feet skidding back at the collision. Ryuuko was panting as the older sister turned, half dragging, half guiding her along, looking back at the screeching cluster as she did. "Run," Satsuki breathed, slapping the dazed girl's cheek. "Ryuuko, run!"

Brow deeply furrowed, Ryuuko had been staring back at the cluster, lips parted, face aghast. The clump of Fibers stuck through her shoulder pulsed with energy, and with emotion.

With pain, and wild, bitter rage. It filled her; it bled thickly, poisonously, into the air around her. It shook her.

It was haunting.

A slap to the cheek snapped her back to awareness. She put her feet on the ground, stumbling a clumsy few steps before running at Satsuki's side.

The roar at their backs shook their bones.

She looked up, as a shadow dropped from overhead.

I can't run away, can I…?

The cluster, having sprung in pursuit, shrank dramatically as it spun through the air, and then showered the earth at their heels in waves of Fiber spears. A shockwave blew them forward, with a mass of exploding earth.

Satsuki landed and rolled to her feet; Ryuuko fell awkwardly, flopping to a halt beside her. Satsuki scowled.

The cluster landed fifteen meters before them, crashing down upon their small campsite.

"It's intelligent," Satsuki murmured, as it rose on an array of spindly legs. The Rending Scissors had been swallowed up.

It shrank again, shining with power as it did; the convulsing heaps of Fibers comprising it twisted and sucked inward, until the steaming cluster was the size of a large car. It paused, as if to adjust, but gave off a steady, many-toned growl as it assessed them.

"Ryuuko," Satsuki said, offering her hand to the woman still on the ground. "Do it."

Ryuuko looked to her with a start, wide eyes desolate. "I…?"

"What are you waiting for? You promised me you wouldn't let us die, didn't you-?!"

"I can't-!"

They leapt apart as a beam of light - pure energy - lanced forward from the cluster's dropping mouth. Satsuki felt, from a meter clear as it passed, that it singed the air. A hundred meters beyond, at the end of a trail of freshly ruptured earth, an explosion rang out to briefly paint the landscape in stark contrast.

Ryuuko was gawking at the sight when her body shook and folded, under a force that smashed against her gut. A distinct body, branched off from the one that glowered her way with one throbbing eye, had slammed into her midair for her inattention, throwing her backwards with a bark of pain.

That look… she thought, cold. *This feeling… it's-* And she crashed to the ground and slid.

A third body had gone for Satsuki; the mass of compacted Life Fibers danced and arced madly, lashing out at parrying blades, leaping to jab out with skewers that were neatly dodged. It formed blades of its own, the number of them indiscernible for how swiftly, fluidly they morphed in and out of form, split, struck, withdrew, lashed out again. Satsuki backpedalled, fighting without blinking.

Her foe drew back, spun violently - swung around an 'arm' that expanded with previously compacted mass. As it swung, the limb flattened into the shape of a scythe to jump in speed, and slam into crossed, black blades.

The earth depressed, cracked at Satsuki's feet, as her knees strained and her arms were forced back by the blocking blades she held. She began to bend - and then shot backwards, tumbling uncontrolled for dozens of meters against hard, unforgiving earth.

A glimpse - she pushed blindly, sprawling upward. A fluid blade arced around, passed beneath her. Well behind her back, trees split in two before exploding outward, annihilating from the plane of the slash.

And she crashed down heavily again, on her side, and rolled to a halt. Gasping in pain, she looked up at the red-black cluster thirty meters away. Her skull throbbed as she tried to stand. *My… body…*

"Stop!" Ryuuko was wailing, hunched on the ground. "Stop this!!"

Satsuki's teeth ground as the cluster consolidated itself again. It stretched out two great arms, from either side of a body that dragged along behind it as it made for her in wild, bounding strides, fanged mouth bellowing in contempt.

Satsuki squared her stance, eyes wide and fierce. *Bakuzan… Don't fail me!*

The fiend leapt forward - and was caught short midair, Fiber-veined eye jumping wide in surprise, as ten glinting red threads circled and snapped taut about it.

Another figure was leaping for its back.

"HISSATSU!"

[CERTAIN KILL]

Two vibrantly crimson blades protracted from two elbows, jutting sturdily along the forearms, toward the wrists, as the arms were

drawn to cross before her.

Sparkling liquid arced down her cheek.

"*KIKEN - DANZETSU!* "

[HAZARD BREAKER]

CRACK-!

Ryuuko's mouth fell open as shattered fragments of her Life Fiber blades glinted in the air before her sweeping arms, scattered like glass on concrete against the creature's back.

Plates of sleek, red-black armor had encircled its form.

It reached back with a colossal arm, plucked her from the carapace, and slammed her to the ground.

Then it lifted its arm, and with a long, unearthly roar, slammed it solidly down where she'd fallen, lurching as it did.

A shockwave sent Satsuki's feet sliding rapidly back, dust and debris assailing the air. She stared from behind an upraised arm, stunned and wordless, as it drew its other arm back, and smashed the earth again. Jutting cracks spread and widened, leaping farther along the ground.

That sound… Satsuki wondered in shock, and the beginnings of comprehension, at its howl. *A sound of outrage… and lament.*

It raised its other arm again.

Ryuuko… you were crying just now, weren't you?

FWHAM!!

Displaced hunks of earth curved upward, torn nonsensically into the air at the tremendous blow.

When the dust had scattered, Ryuuko was there, broken and bloody, half-buried in compacted earth - arms brightly veined, and crimson hands braced against the wall that was the creature's fist. Bloodstained eyes were cringing, with a look that seemed heedless of her own physical pain.

"What'd I do?" she whimpered, as the monster above her struggled in a blind rage, howled and fought to crush her.

"What'd I *do?!* " she demanded again, screaming over it. "What'd I do to turn you into this?!"

"Ryuuko!" Satsuki shouted in warning, as its other fist rose again.

The girl's watering eyes were horrified, her voice strained as her mouth stretched wide.

"How did I make you this angry?! Senketsu!"

Satsuki's heart shook.

Then she slashed out at the air, sending her power slicing destructively into the cluster's descending arm. She hadn't broken any cores, she knew; those would in all likelihood be locked tightly away in its armored body. Still it yowled and reeled, a mad yellow eye casting about furiously as the gouged appendage sprayed with human blood. Spotting Satsuki, it gave a screech and lifted its good arm from Ryuuko, drawing back to swing the older sister's way.

An upward kick - a clumsy move, and from the ground Ryuuko sent the fist recoiling upward and back as it was passing. In its wake, her leg was bending, as if freely, to an unnatural angle above her.

After a brief delay, pressure punched the air; the punished earth at Ryuuko's back exploded outward again as she was flattened to it, and her twisted leg, from the knee down, burst into jutting shards of bone and spraying blood.

She coughed softly, strengthless, and choked on the taste of liquid copper. A dull but high-pitched shrill rang steadily around her ears. Vaguely she registered Satsuki running past her, going on the attack in retaliation, cutting by the fiend with a vicious slash. She felt the Senketsu-cluster's scream as it chased and attacked. She felt Satsuki evading, running, slipping from the range of its strikes. Struggling to deal damage.

A ragged breath. Ryuuko clutched at her heart, felt her lungs straining painfully around ribs that had grown a bit too acquainted with them.

Is this…

… *What you'd call 'repentance'…?*

She chuckled bitterly, water running with blood back into her sweaty hair, tickling coldly in her ringing ears.

I… I fucked up, didn't I?

Satsuki, leaping to dodge a sudden shower of skewers - into the path of a momentous fist, closing rapidly as she caught sight of it.

I'm sorry.

Ryuuko's shoulder was there first - bumping Satsuki aside.

A hard wall of force, a fist wider than Ryuuko was tall, crushed into her front. She buckled against it; eyes stretched wide, blood raining from a breathless nose and mouth, as more inside of her burst and cracked.

All this time… maybe it wasn't death I was chasing, was it?

It was repentance.

It was the same thing Satsuki starts to feel, when I hurt her. When she's thinking of the Kiryuuin's karma.

Senketsu had leapt in pursuit of her flung form, glancing her with a vicious uppercut. Ryuuko watched the cloudy sky, then the razed battleground, pan crazily across her swimming vision. It was like she was flying, weightless, until she hit ground with a splintering crunch.

Even now… I just move*, don't I?*

The impact, somehow, had made her alert. She tried to sit up, flailing onto her side - and was bombarded by a dozen missiles fired from beneath deformed, flaring lapels on Senketsu's form.

Satsuki saw Ryuuko scramble brokenly and be buried in the explosions of a rain of Life Fiber bombs. In the clearing smoke a bloody figure rose halfway, mindlessly, and propelled itself forward in a short shove of one leg - to crash down face-first, motionless.

The long-haired woman rushed in the hope of attacking the enemy's blind side, only to be confronted with a fresh wave of explosives. She ducked, narrowly cutting her dash to slide under the path of the projectiles; as they exploded behind her a great, bladed arm lashed out. She jumped aside, rolling, and continued to run.

A huge fist winding back, swinging into her path. Pivot.

A twinge, a sliding foot scraping through coarse dirt, and her knee was on the ground.

Shit… !

"HA!" she shouted, raising her head, and a wave of force smacked sharply into the oncoming foe. But it was massive, with the dense weight of its Fibers and energy of thirty-odd cores; rather than go flying, as a mortal creature might, it was merely buffeted. Drawing

back with a howl, it swung its titanic fist down, toward Satsuki - and onto Ryuuko's upraised hands, with a boom.

Satsuki didn't blink at the wild-eyed girl suddenly crouched above her and shaking with strength. The Bakuzan Kouryuu flashed around as Satsuki gathered herself and sprang - severing the beast's arm near the fist Ryuuko was holding off.

It reeled, staggering back with a screech. At least it responded to pain-

"No-!"

Satsuki turned just in time to see the Life Fiber fist, losing form, snap down about Ryuuko's body, latching onto her arm, torso, and neck. The girl fell to one knee, pulling and clawing vainly at the clinging, rippling threads. Her body locked up as they squeezed, forcing themselves violently on her bleeding shoulder and other wounds. Sweat rolled down her face; crimson veins were covering her form, from jaw to extremities.

"I can't… m-move… !"

The main cluster was throwing itself toward them.

Satsuki shouted, halting it, willpower alone blowing it one foot back. She stepped in front of Ryuuko, stance strong, blades upraised, steel eyes intensely resolute.

The cluster opened its mouth, firing a blast of light. Satsuki bore her ki outward with a shout, one sword angling vertically before her. The oncoming blast split in two, twin branches sundering the earth on either side of Satsuki and the girl behind her.

Satsuki's hair fluttered quietly in the wind, in the smoke of scorched earth, as she stared the beast down.

Its bloodshot eye almost seemed to focus. For one instant, it held something like acknowledgment.

Then it drew back, as Satsuki squared her stance again.

It lunged and roared; she yelled, bombarding it with an unrelenting flux of her aura. Her feet dug down; her fists tightened strongly on her blades. Head high, she held the monster immobile this way as it struggled mid-swing.

She sank into a combative stance, drawing back a moment before it finally shattered her pressure. When the monster thus swung, she swung right back, prepared to meet it with everything she had left.

A flash of black-red shot forward at her side, meeting the nearing fist with concussive force.

Satsuki looked back at the grim-faced woman who stepped stiffly up at her side. The clinging fibers she'd attacked with twitched and pulsed erratically in the air, woven at the base into Ryuuko's shoulder and back. She flexed a shaking hand.

"You and I… are still the same kind of monster after all, ain't we, Senketsu?"

The cluster before them growled furiously, seething as it had whenever it laid its eye on Ryuuko. Consumed by rage.

"I couldn't believe you'd forgotten me. But you never forgot me, either - you know exactly who I am, and at this point, that's all the more reason you wanna kick my sorry ass. But I wondered why, when I looked at you, I saw my own rage staring me back in the face."

A tear ran down her cheek. Teeth gritting, she reached forward, as if to touch.

"Even sustained within you… the source of it's unmistakable. I'm sorr… no. I said I'd never make you cry such bitter tears again, didn't I? I failed your trust… utterly and completely. And I can't ever ask you to forgive me for that.

"But…" She spread her feet, raising one fist to her side. "I'm not ready to die just yet. There's something I've gotta do."

The snarling creature before them lowered its body as it shivered in rage, diseased with it.

The girl and the kamui leapt as one.

Ryuuko flexed her hand, drew back, and swung a fist ablaze with an aura of vivid power.

The Fibers fused to her back snapped to form, fiber weaving to the form of tissue, tissues solidifying to the shape of muscle. In the shadow of her move, a gargantuan Life Fiber fist, blazing with energy, connected spectacularly with what had been Senketsu, sending stray bits of warped, shattered armor careening into the air.

An outraged screech, and it swung for Ryuuko's unguarded side. Fibers now flowed from the skin of that rising arm, and from her back - melding into another titanic hand that latched firmly onto the wrist, catching the strike. The Senketsu-cluster lunged for her with its fang-lined maw, and Ryuuko's first Life Fiber fist latched onto his 'head' and upper jaw, thumb digging in his mouth, wrestling him back as he howled in her face.

"You're crazy strong, all right," she said, deathly calm. "But so's the first human I ever consumed. The first human… I ever *destroyed!* "

The Fibers Ryuuko commanded wrenched, stretching what they held until it split elastically, snapped like hair - ripped off the cluster's arm. She moved forward, and threw a staggering, three-hit combo of Fiber manipulation punches, rattling the air and driving the battered

enemy back; armor crumbled and sailed from its form faster than it could regenerate it.

Satsuki's eyes were wide. "Ryuuko… y-you…?"

"Yeah," she said bitterly, "it's clear now-!"

A skewer lanced out from the weakened cluster as Ryuuko was drawing back again. It had been its last shot; more than a hand's length across, it pierced her gut and drove her back.

She swore as the great power of moments before tried to realign; Senketsu would assimilate her, with the skewer rapidly spreading and fusing still more fibers into her gut. The Fibers she controlled were paralyzed. Her knees shook, and summarily dropped her.

A hand clapped onto her shoulder - a shoulder half-overrun with eerily pulsating threads though it was.

"You have the resolve now, right?" Satsuki asked, looking from the corner of her eye.

Ryuuko nodded, and took her hand.

Senketsu might have had a better shot than the average cluster at assimilating Ryuuko. But the fact remained that he couldn't synchronize with *Satsuki's* energy with the crisp, flawless ease with which Ryuuko did.

I'm the one who can make the most of this power, after all.

When she straightened, her control was uncompromised. Her hair danced, streaked in brilliant blue undertones as power arced across her skin. What had broken in her battered body solidified, ordered itself, and was strong again. Taking a breath, she opened her eyes on the immense but cowering figure of her foe. And she found she was connected to him - his despair, his rage, his fear.

He had suffered so much, spent so long quiet and alone. She felt it all, in his bitter, beautiful soul.

We're so… so in sync right now, aren't we? she realized, lip trembling with emotion. *But…*

Her hand latched strongly onto the skewer in her gut.

"I'm sorry, old friend. I can't wear you anymore."

The power spiraling madly through her body coalesced in her arm, until her flesh seemed to blaze with streaming shards of multicolored light. Her hand clenched, crimson claws piercing.

HISSATSU

( )

[CERTAIN KILL]

The power shot like lightning into the great skewer of Life Fibers, tracing it to strike clean into Senketsu's heart. Trailing it, innumerable starbursts of light swept in a wave through the skewer, and every fiber of the cluster's being. His eye grew wide as he was blown backwards, a small, stark droplet of light sparkling intensely from deep within his blackening form - and fading.

"***SAIGAI DANZETSU!*** "

[CALAMITY BREAKER]

The cluster shuddered, compacted grotesquely into itself - and exploded in a blast of light and thunderous sound, a final,

disembodied howl resounding in the air. A shockwave in one instant passed, and in the next razed the jagged earth, and cracked it again.

Satsuki had shielded her face with her arms, bracing against the blast. Lowering them as the winds petered out, she saw Ryuuko standing strong as before, crouched with one palm outstretched before her. The girl started to sway, hair settling as her appearance reverted.

Before them was… nothing. Where the cluster had been was falling dust and empty air - empty but for two scissor blades clattering down, and dozens of short, glowing red threads, aimlessly afloat.

Then the drifting threads froze in the air - for one moment suspended - and shot toward Ryuuko, snapping and burrowing into the quickly vanishing wound in her gut.

Ryuuko straightened with a grunt. She scowled as patterns of red returned to her skin, burning across her form with the new power surging through her, lighting up the mess of Life Fibers still half-fused to her. Then it all snapped inward - every fused thread swallowed into her body and cleanly integrated by the time her wounds sealed behind them.

The world blurred around her; she fell forward, knees and elbows struck by the earth before she realized she'd lost her footing. And she screamed.

She grasped at her skull, thrashing; saliva ran from her lips as she flailed, struck and cracked the earth with a hand. So much power - so many Life Fibers, burning inside her-

A grip on her shoulder. A blind move.

Satsuki crashed painfully down on her shoulder and side, gasping as she bounced to a halt. She blinked in confusion, bringing a shaking hand to her jaw. Wet - her skin had broken. Her mouth hung open in

shock. Ryuuko's knuckles had clipped her. Satsuki had felt it like a sledgehammer.

She now saw her younger sister a ways before her, shoulders hunched like a wild thing, eyes furious and sightless as she snarled. On her knees, her head flung back with a horrific howl, arms back, eyes wide.

And suddenly, her rage seemed to melt; she slouched as if empty, and her body lurched. She vomited in the dirt, a meager breakfast dyed in the blood of already-mended wounds. Then she fainted.

Satsuki didn't move. She was tired, and her head throbbed.

But by the tension in Ryuuko's shuddering form, Satsuki knew she dreamed.

-Ghosts-

End

NEXT TIME

IN WHAT SHOULD HAVE BEEN A FINAL BATTLE…

'SOMETHING' WENT AWRY.

- assimilation

Break the World at the End of Days

Chapter 22: Break the World at the End of Days

In what should have been a final battle… 'something' went awry.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

[img: http://orig01.deviantart.net/bbe0/f/2016/007/7/a/at_the_end_of_days___logo_by_hinata0321-d9n1u4n.png]

Twenty-Two \ Break the World - - At the End of Days

This day.

Blood, scattering like so many melting petals from Nui's strike. Gamagoori screams, voice cracking into a shriek, wide eyes watering from where he's fallen short. There's nothing he can do. Nothing anyone can do. The blood's already flying.

She never wanted to look at this day again.

She'd half-stripped out of a Senketsu paralyzed by the pressure of Absolute Submission. Now she can only stare like an idiot, slack-jawed, frozen and cold.

She finishes tearing the stiff kamui off. She's at her side, knees scraping in the dirt, arms encircling her friend as she falls.

"*Mako… MAKO!!*"

A shaking hand. A gentle squeeze to the forearm, apologetic, while her life spills out on Ryuuko's bare lap.

Those eyes.

"*R-Ryuuko-chan…?"*

A feeble, wincing smile, from lips that let fall one bright, bright rivulet of blood.

And she goes limp.

"*Ma… ko…"*

Ryuuko's breathing too fast. Her chest hurts, head hurts. This isn't how it should've happened. She should've protected her.

"*Whoopsies!" a sweet voice laughs, striking Ryuuko like a lash, making her shoulders shake. The speaker flicks blood disdainfully from an artificial hand. "Silly me - I actually wasted one of the little piggies, huh? My bad, Lady Ragyou!"*

But Ragyou's gaze is for Ryuuko only, just now.

Ryuuko, who feels the blood soaking into her lap, the fresh life slipping ethereally away, faint but still there. Ryuuko, who gives a shaking breath, as chaos crackles in her eyes. Kindling in her soul.

Something is awakening.

"*You… cut her down without thinkin' about it? Just for the heck of it…?"*

She's caught the flow. It's so precious, so delicate. And she's draining her light, ending her pain, without even knowing how.

"*Yup!" Nui chirps in her sugary shrill, ever-amused with herself. "Humans are just sooo weak, aren't they? Just like that, they die-!"*

Ryuuko's hand is on Nui's chest.

An explosion of disintegrating Fibers, skin, tissue, and blood, and a stiffly smiling head, with whitened skin, sails to the ground and bounces away.

Mako's life force-

*It's fucking **strong**.*

"*RAAAAAAAARRGHH!!*"

In the air, Ragyou is one moment stunned - the next moment, diverting a hand that bursts with claws. But Ryuuko sees her fear, and thirsts.

A string of blocked moves, air cracking and thrashing with force - and then Ryuuko's got her slender neck in her hand. Squeezing with a crunch, as she whirls to hurl the reigning demon to the earth.

Ragyou sails like a missile, straight. Crashes, breaks the earth. Her body, godly robe and all, carves out a path of devastation and sailing stone, broken through everything in its path until its moment-long, seventy-meter trip ends in a collision with the base of the transmitter shielding.

A tremendous wave ripples across the arc of the barrier. It shatters, dissipates, crashing down with scattering pieces of the Primordial Life Fiber's husk.

Ragyou lifts her head, caked with dirt and blood, crimson muscle tissue showing in many a place through torn and shredded skin. And she sees a fiend soaring high above from a leap, arms out, knees bent, screaming as it descends.

And Ryuuko's slamming down against her like a girl-sized meteor, crushing the wind out of her, pinning her down, sending a harsh spray of blood from her painted lips. And the girl's arm is in the earth beneath her - having plunged shoulder-deep, clear through Ragyou's

body - grasping intently, as Ryuuko pins her forehead to Ragyou's and roars long and loud in her cringing face.

The quailing earth, dented by Ryuuko's landing, shatters - a fifty-meter radius, bursting with hurled stone and debris. The transmitter's reinforced tower groans and tilts sharply, but does not break.

If only it had broken.

But Ryuuko's attention is consumed by the terror, the pure, true, delectable ***terror*** *in Ragyou's eyes as Ryuuko wrenches her arm back - withdraws with her still-beating prize, glowing with Fibers and connected by tough, unnaturally extending veins.*

If only she had crushed it then.

But she feels everything, everything she feels and everything her mother feels, with sick brilliance. A vengeful spirit, she shouts in rage, somehow frenzied. And her fibrous hand squeezes, fuses into the heart, as she once more taps into the flow of power, and pulls.

She will take all that she is.

"*Ryuuko…?!" As her life is plundered, Ragyou's eyes grow round - and a smile sprawls across her lips. Exhilaration bleeds into eye-watering exultance. For suddenly, life could not be more amusing. There is no trace of resistance; she looks powerlessly upon the young monster above her, and lets herself be dominated.*

She has found a new god.

The woman's eyes roll back, and she howls in ecstasy as Ryuuko's aura swells with her power, as the screaming air sparks and cracks and thrashes away from them. As Ragyou's skin grows gaunt and taut, as her armor, Shinra Kouketsu, is unraveled and stripped away. So much noise and light. The flux, so enormous it continuously burns and splits Ryuuko's instantly healing skin. But she can only continue ravishing the putrid energy, like a starving beast, devouring until her

mother's drained body collapses to the scattering threads of fibrous veins, before even these are surrendered, sucked completely into Ryuuko's hunched form.

The earth lurches underfoot, as if with weight. The land throbs in a heartbeat of calm.

If only it could have ended there.

Ryuuko stands on broken earth and sways, eyes wild, overwhelmed. And she throws back her arms and screams, hurls a resonant bellow from her lungs, as a vortex of catastrophic power whips up around her. Vaguely, she perceives an audience. They are wary. They are nothing - like ants. Screaming in irrepressible rage, blind with boundless strength, she leaps.

Straight into the crimson sky, she rises, and rises, and rises, head down and arms out. She is clad in nothing, and yet, soaring like this and floating is a laughably trivial feat. She can do anything. Anything at all. Mako's power was great; Ragyou's has dwarfed and drowned it, a lake to a raindrop. A lord's garish feast, to crumbs. Everything about this state, about each successive moment, is utterly incomprehensible.

A grimace.

What is she doing.

Smoothly spreading arms, spreading claws, as a fanged mouth cracks open.

What is she even *doing.*

She looks upon a world that quavers like a lamb beneath her. Desolate eyes grow madly severe.

HISSATSU

[CERTAIN KILL]

Why. ***Why.***

"SEKAI DANZETSU!"

[WORLD BREAKER]

CRACK.

The wave erupts out, with terrible energy - forked lightning splits the black-red sky in sixty places at once - the transmitter warps below her, assailed by a flux of activated power. It sparks for several seconds, air distorting dramatically around it, and explodes.

But the power of cataclysm is still raining like fire from Ryuuko, borne outward by her rage. Bolts of it flash to the earth, hacking, sundering; hitting Academy buildings, they slice and tear through, rampant explosions of whorling flame and smoke blossoming in their wake.

On grounds that roll and buck in a continuous earthquake, Satsuki sees one stray flare of light lance her way. The Bakuzan Kouryuu snaps up immediately in her hand.

The bolt deflects aside, straight into the chest of Sanageyama a short way behind her.

Satsuki's breath stops as she stares back at him in shock, as he is blown off his feet, eyes wide, his blood sailing as a thick, frothy spray from his chest.

And his uniform writhes against him, losing form - mutating rapidly, exploding into an angry tangle of threads. The reverted Life Fibers

swell and swallow him, transforming him, as with a howl and buried scream an autonomous cluster is born.

Eyes hardening painfully, Satsuki levels her gaze fiercely toward the howling, crying figure in the sky. The tower of Honnouji crashes broken to the earth.

The long-haired woman races forward, dodging crimson bolts, until she stands a way before Ryuuko, glaring up at her from the shaking earth.

She levels a blade at the mindless being in the sky. Her hand shakes.

"*Matoi… RYUUKO!!*"

The air is thick with malice; this close, at the eye of the storm where the bolts do not strike, the ki itself is almost unbearable. Crushing.

None of that matters. What just happened to Sanageyama, and how everyone else is faring, doesn't matter yet. This must stop. Junketsu is spasming, writhing against her; she can probably wring one more transformation out of the kamui, while it's enthralled by the rain of tyrannical order.

Ryuuko angles her head downward, furious and grim… and grins. The girl who'd been screaming and possessed, spotting her with blank, piercing red eyes, grins. And she laughs, a low, throaty husk, a rumble like a growl, the noise swelling to a mad racket of demonic laughter from a wide-open, frothing mouth.

Satsuki doesn't quite realize the moment the Bakuzan drops from her hand. She can't blink for the pressure.

What is this?

Her knees shake. The world is burning. Her sister is laughing.

This…

Lips parted, she falls to her knees, back straight and arms limp, staring aghast at the mad creature in the sky. Everything is over. It's surreal.

This can't be happening, but it is.

Kiryuuin karma, accrued and blackened so steadily over generations, now lurching, straining, under the single worst mass murderer the world has ever known.

A touch to her shoulder. She gasps.

"*Ryuuuuukooooooooo!" a dark uniform cries, leaping past Satsuki and shooting into the sky.*

He forces himself onto her. She scowls, outraged and confused. Struggles.

Then she goes rigid.

'*Ryuuko, don't do anymore! You don't want to do this! Mako wouldn't want this!'*

Sen… ketsu…?!

He doesn't hesitate. He takes her insatiable rage with her blood, swallows it down and wraps it up in his own fibers, his entire being. Imbued, inseparably, with the poison of newborn madness and destruction. So he contorts under the weight of raw chaos, begins to become wild. They scream together.

Then with a shove of willpower he plunges himself into stasis, shutting down to lock the horrors away. At least one of them doesn't need to cry.

And it's over. The angry god, tamed - her hand, at least, stayed. Rage, quelled. And the world, caught one inch short of annihilation, to wake to the dawn of a new era.

This is the era of the end.

'Ryuuko…'

His final lucid thought, as darkness closes around him.

'Ryuuko, p-please… you must destroy me, or I-I'll-,'

But Ryuuko is out cold, eyes white, before she crashes headfirst to the earth.

-Break the World-

End

END OF PART II

- broke the world

See You at the End of Days

Chapter 23: See You at the End of Days

"On a drive… on a drive… on a one-way street to Hell~!"

Pages 7-9 of the comic are up. I've been seriously slacking on it; the remaining pages have been lined since a while back, but I'm feeling lazy on adding the tones ^^; You can find it in this folder on my dA, or on my tumblr here.

This chapter might be a bit confusing. Flashbacks and flashback thoughts should be fairly clear, though the flashbacks themselves aren't all chronological… maybe I could have planned it better, but we'll see if it works.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

[img: http://orig01.deviantart.net/bbe0/f/2016/007/7/a/at_the_end_of_days___logo_by_hinata0321-d9n1u4n.png]

Twenty-Three \ See You - - At the End of Days

The two were running down a street through a dead city block - a young woman and a younger boy, tired, ragged, but frantic. Breaths audibly raked their parched throats. Their steps were clumsy and desperate, their clasped hands white, as they fled the Life Fiber cluster that roamed eagerly in pursuit. It flung spindly threads into the earth before it, dragging itself nearer in lurching moves.

Light feet raced across a rooftop, and leapt.

The girl had fallen, foot caught on cracked asphalt. The boy looked back, stumbling to a halt. "Nee-chan!"

A roar. Two sets of eyes widened in horror as the amorphous fiend of fibers lunged for its prize, prepared to feast.

But the shadow that fell over them did not belong to it.

"HYAH!"

It was a rough sound with which the figure landed, the smooth sweep of sword and dagger dicing the skewers that had arced toward them. The siblings watched in awe as the long-haired woman rose to full height before them; the sheer force of her presence seemed to render her ten feet tall, and sent the mess of crimson threads reeling back, as if struck.

Then the warrior shuddered. Still she lashed out savagely when the cluster tried to attack again; she cut down more skewers, and lunged to hack for its 'body,' causing it to shriek.

"You two," she growled, a glare cutting back at them - her eyes ice blue and grey, wide and severe. "Take this and get out of here, now!"

She flicked back her arm, flinging a folded card that wedged one corner into the earth at their feet.

"Make haste for the refugee stronghold on that map! The people there will protect you!"

"Wh… who are you?"

"Who I am is IRRELEVANT!" she declared, and turned her back on them. Her stance squared as the roiling cluster rose up angrily to consider her. "I will not fall in such a place as this!"

She was still strong enough, evidently, to compel two children believe her words. The girl took the map, and they fled.

Satsuki countered a sudden strike, and tore into her foe with a cry of war.

Twenty-three days since the fall of Honnouji Academy.

The cluster we fought today was more powerful than seems to be the norm. But after she destroyed it, Ryuuko… Ryuuko claimed its core had once been Sanageyama.

If she were anyone else, I would say she were imagining things. But she is dismayed; she says she is certain. And also, the one in question…

Sanageyama Uzu… Something significant happened. Rather, I think I saw it happen. Yet it remains just out of reach, as if to taunt me. And his body was among several I could not locate, at the disaster site.

What happened to you, my friend?

"*Ungh… !* "

It was quiet. She'd seen the core, and the cluster built around it, scattered by her blades. The only sound was her labored breath, and the trip of shuffling feet as she staggered, fell to the ground at the wall.

She coughed, sitting up and leaning her head back; her arm folded across bruised ribs. She'd let the damned thing smack her…

She gasped as pain twinged in her arm - burning, as if with an electrical shock. A hand slipped a small spray bottle quickly from a pouch at her belt, and she leveled the nozzle at the short length of squirming, crimson threads protruding from her forearm. The fibers froze under the cone of spray, falling limp, before she shifted to administer to their other ends on the back of her arm.

These days, she usually ran. She felt less shame for it than she might have initially expected; injuries were burdens she couldn't afford. Banged up ribs, lost blood, torn muscle tissue… she'd need to be careful now, until she was in good shape again.

But when humans were in danger before her eyes, there was no choice but to fight.

She returned the spray to the bag, withdrawing next a thick glove; she slipped it on, tied it tight by a velcro strap at the wrist. With her hand protected, she gripped the tranquilized fibers at her skin firmly. She gave a steady pull.

Teeth clenched immediately. She watched, intent, as the bloodstained fibers came with slow, crunching resistance from her flesh, splitting skin further where the fine, webbed strands had fused and spread. The arm's fingers splayed quietly, spasmed into odd positions. Her throat tightened, grating; her brow furrowed, twitched, as one eye winced. A fine tendril of blood broke free, gravitating down along her arm.

Finally, in a rough squelch of tearing and nerve pain, she tossed the dying Fibers aside, and breathed again. Fist clenched, she pinned her shoulders and head firmly against the wall, and her good forearm across her eyes.

---

249 days since the fall of Honnouji Academy.

I've begun to experience a curious nightmare. I thought nothing of it, when it first appeared. But it has recurred many a time now.

In it, it's that day again, and Ryuuko… No. This is foolishness.

---

416 days since the fall.

The dream grows still more vivid each night it surfaces…

It can't be true. It makes no sense. Surely… no.

Perhaps it matters not any longer. If it were true… even if it were, what then? There is nothing to be done about it now; knowing would only bring her greater pain.

I will live out my days with Ryuuko in this world; this is the life we have chosen together, and all that remains to us any longer.

When Satsuki hobbled into the hideout, the worst of her wounds bandaged, she all but threw herself onto the mattress. She lay on her side for a long while, lips parted and dry, eyes shut. A shaking hand groped for a water bottle, but fell still after seizing on its plastic exterior. Consciousness danced in and out.

-"*You knew. You knew everything."-*

Satsuki's lip twitched.

-"*I couldn't remember clearly, at first. I still don't fully-,"*

The side of a fist, striking the wall hard enough to crack it. "So WHAT?!" The look in her wild eyes - damaged, hurt, confused. Haunted. "It came back, and you didn't think to tell me that I… Th-that I… !"-

Satsuki's arms flexed - as if with the memory of the embrace she had wrapped around her sister's sobbing form, desperate to usher her to calm.

"I didn't know *how* to…"

-"*You knew. You knew what I was capable of, and you decided you could - what, you could tame me with hugs and words of trust? And everything would work out okay?" -*

Her arms twitched, as if with the angrily broken embrace. A look of distrust flashed through her mind.

-"*You thought you'd manage a* monster *by appeasing and humoring. But you were afraid, the entire time. So you strung me along, deciding* you *knew what was best… You never worried about me, did you? You put rectifying the Kiryuuin's karma first. Of course you did. The rational move, no matter whose expense."*

"*Ryuuko… I never* pretended *to love you!"*

"*Then you're rational in the worst way, and you're* irrational *in the worst way, too. You're the one who decided on your own to risk handing me enough power to destroy the entire fucking world!"-*

The window was darkening, by the time the throbbing in her head dulled, and she had successfully choked down a few swigs of water. She pulled out her journal eventually, and a pen that shook in her grasp. Entries had been growing lax, as of late.

1357th day.

Just two months since

She paused. An image from earlier - of that brother and sister clinging to each other - rose to her mind. Part of her wanted to smile.

Instead, her breath shook.

-"*I'm here for you now… sis."-*

Teeth gritted. A hand draped itself across her face, covered her eyes.

-"*I'm here now. And I'll stay here with you… always." -*

Her chest ached.

Did I… let myself grow dependent on someone…?

That night, she lay awake. Her eyelids would flutter involuntarily open, and she would snap to bitter wakefulness, each time they'd nearly drifted shut. This was the sort of night ahead of her, probably.

One when she couldn't quite get herself to shut out the fact that Ryuuko hadn't scanned the vicinity.

She could not rest, however tired she became. She wondered if she would ever truly rest again.

She could go to the stronghold. She had, a few times.

This time, she could face the questions they asked her. Face the concern in Houka's eyes. She could.

I never imagined I would end up alone again.

I never thought to.

I'm so sorry.

1229th day.

It's real. Every bit of it is real.

What she did to me… and then to Shin'yuu-san…

It is once more clear - the reality of that day.

I cannot seem to hate her.

After all this time… Even knowing what this girl is responsible for, I…

I want to believe in her.

How do we proceed, from here?

Perhaps what has been done can in fact be undone. With the two of us, together…

But if I tell her… if she panics…

No; she is so optimistic, now. What good would it do to devastate her with this knowledge?

If anyone can bear it for her, I can. Her karma is the Kiryuuin's karma, after all.

This is *the appropriate course of action. The best chance we have of winning this battle is if she remains calm. While she still cannot explain why, she says she is terrified of what she might do with my power; perhaps her subconscious fuels this aversion. Some part of her almost certainly recalls the truth of that day, and impels her instinctively to fear. But such doubt will cripple her, if compounded.*

Yet… If we can indeed win this battle, after all… what, then? Do I tell her then…?

It… would that be cruel? Or is the true cruelty in keeping this from her?

Ryuuko has begun having nightmares; last night, she woke in a panic. I managed to calm her, but my hands now shake.

Nightmares. Is it returning to her, as it did to me? Does she begin to recall that day?

I must continue to monitor her. She is reluctant to share what ails her; I will not press her, then, if she can be kept calm this way for now.

It is paramount that she remains stable…

-"What are you reading?" She stands in the doorway, skin turning cold. Lunging, she snatches her notebook from her sister's hands. "What the hell are you reading, Ryuuko?!"

The girl does not answer, looking blankly into the terror plain in her sister's eyes.-

---

A sigh slipped into the air.

So… here I am, at last.

Such a thought, in such a place, was one she might never have expected. In a different life… Kiryuuin Satsuki might have glowered sternly at the woman leaning slouched against the wall, weary and motionless.

The straight-backed, smartly dressed, stone-faced high-schooler that scowled down at her faded from her mind, as the cellar ceiling shook above. Dirt settled on her hair, her clothes. It stung tired eyes.

The cluster had been too strong, and she had been too injured already when it had found her. She had run, only for it to prove quite determined. They were all so dogged, lately…

By now, its constricting form had probably crushed the building above. It pounded sloppily on the trapdoor; she was able to glimpse a shimmer of red-black through the cracks, as she gazed desolately upward.

… *I'm so tired.*

The room rattled around her.

"You're not coming this time, are you…?"

The worthless journal fell off her lap. Its final line-

This has been my last entry.

And it clapped shut, at her side. Her eyes followed in closing.

Ryuuko… My sister…

Is this the end you had envisioned for me?

"*I need to know, Ryuuko. So many cores… Was it… It wasn't the people of the stronghold?"*

They stood in the remains of a hideout - the hideout where Ryuuko had last carefully hung Senketsu on the wall.

"*No… none a' them, that I could tell." A bitter laugh. "Of course it had a backup plan… it must have spent so much time preparing a battery that huge, just to charge with Senketsu…" Her hand on the wall shook, clenched. "When it consumed him… when it forced him to wake up… he cried, in despair."*

"*Ryuuko…"*

"*How's your jaw?" The question cutting in, making Satsuki's hand flinch an inch shy of her shoulder.*

"*It doesn't even hurt."*

"*I knocked you out, didn't I? And the busted skin's scarring…"*

"*I still woke up before you did… Ryuuko, you didn't mean to hurt me. It simply caught me by surprise."*

"*Hm…"*

Ryuuko's strength returned soon, but she remained distant. She didn't make eye contact. She didn't speak.

And Satsuki couldn't break the silence.

At least, not until she found Ryuuko with the journal in her hands.

She'd been gone for an hour, unexplained, before Satsuki began to search.

She found her younger sister alone, standing on a bridge, gazing somberly over the ruins of Toukyou. She called her name, and was almost startled when the girl met her eyes directly, with a gaze sharp and subtly cold.

"*I was worried," Satsuki managed in a moment. "What are you doing, out here? It's getting dark. You're not even dressed warmly enough for this weather."*

Ryuuko looked forward again, not facing her.

"*What?" Satsuki said, keeping her voice from shaking. "You won't speak to me now?"*

"*Did you talk to me?" was the response that drifted back to her. "Or were ya' scared, to talk to the one who fucked the world over?"*

"You know I never meant to hurt you."

"*Course not." Her voice was glum. "You were afraid to wake up the monster I am. Rightly so. Maybe… I was afraid, too. But I didn't know just what kinda' power we were playin' with, and I made the mistake of thinking* you *could control me. You, scared shitless…"*

"*I'm not afraid of you!"*

"Aren't you?"

And Ryuuko stood before her - low, reaching out.

She captured Satsuki in a rigid embrace.

One heartbeat of confusion, as Ryuuko's fingers ran up the back of her shirt, and the back of neck, nestled up into Satsuki's hair. Then sensation blossomed vibrantly against every inch of Satsuki's body in contact with Ryuuko's, blowing out her practiced resistance like a bludgeon to a shield of glass.

"*Hmm…?" A sultry sound. "You're* right*, sis. It's not* fear *you're feeling right now, is it? Your face says as much…"*

"*M-my…?" Satsuki trembled in feverish bursts; she registered a tear falling down her cheek. Then she noticed her lips had twitched into an open-mouthed smile. "N… no…"*

But the bliss shook her to the core - saturating. She felt light, felt warm, felt her worries stripped away with her draining power. She could only give in.

A warm breath caressed her flesh - and sharp incisors sank harshly into the muscle beside the base of her neck. She could barely cry out before even this sensation was twisted into incomprehensible pleasure, melding into drowning waves of it until a long moan instead rose from deep in her gut, pooled in her throat, and surged freely to her lips, as her blood was greedily drawn.

Ryuuko's teeth relinquished their hold. Satsuki shuddered, eyebrows drawn inward; whispered words at her ear seemed to pierce directly to her soul.

"The pleasure of being worn by Life Fibers… how does it feel? Sa-tsu-ki…?"

She didn't realize how desperately she'd begun to cling until she was shoved away. She dropped, hitting the ground in a crippled daze. At any duration, it would have ended too quickly; if she could only have felt that way, swallowed up by that bliss, for eternity…

"Even you, in the end, are a slave to the Purpose? Pathetic…"

Satsuki blinked in derangement, lifting her eyes as she panted unevenly. A godly being stood before her, shimmering with power, intensely blue eyes narrowed with a scoff of disdain. Satsuki wilted under the chastisement. "I'm n-not… !"

"So easily rendered powerless," *Ryuuko interjected, voice echoing lightly with rage,* "will you now lie to my face? This is all our progress amounts to - a joke."

"*R-Ryuuko…" Satsuki whimpered, senses beginning to right themselves. She felt a twinge within her, at that look - fear. And in one suffocating moment, she comprehended her present powerlessness.*

But then she saw her turning away.

"A joke… just like everything we've been chasing all this time. You get it now, don't you? The only 'advantages' we have… are that we're a damn good, quality energy bank for these parasites, and that we have no power at all to keep them from taking it. We can't oppose them any more than *you* can oppose me."

Satsuki scowled as she began to walk away, but her body was weak; her neck was actually bleeding quite badly. Quivering fingers scraped against dusty asphalt. "Ryuuko - where are you going?!"

"There's… something I gotta do."

"*What can you do alone?!" Satsuki cried - and flinched, as those blue, blue eyes met her again, in a gaze cast sidelong over Ryuuko's shoulder, with words that met Satsuki like a slap.*

"I've always **been** alone."

Only silence remained, then. Her sight dimmed, shook, as she stared as long as she could after Ryuuko's fading back.

When next Satsuki woke, for the first time in as long as she could remember she was utterly and completely alone.

Somewhere, she knew, her sister was as well.

The room rumbled again. A screeching howl sounded from above. Satsuki still didn't bat an eye.

"I… was finally left behind… for being weak?"

Her brow furrowed to a small degree.

Is this my end? Trapped like a rat…?

No… trapped like a pig, to the glutton.

Her teeth ground bitterly.

"You despaired, knowing the pain Senketsu felt as he was assimilated. Yet *this* is the death you presumed to leave me to?" A laugh. "*Abandoned* by someone given such a name as yours…"

Her knuckles were white.

And yet…

I'm so tired. It's cold.

The bolted trapdoor strained with pressure, then rattled at a blow that sent more dust showering into the room.

My 'purpose'… what was it, all along?

Satsuki took a breath, and moved from the wall. In the center of the room, she knelt.

I don't know… but if I was going to fail it so profoundly, perhaps this should have at least happened at Honnouji, that day.

The Kiryuuin line… was always meant to perish with me. That was what I believed.

Perhaps Ryuuko had had the right idea, as she lay grieving in that classroom so long ago. Perhaps Satsuki should have seen her off, and followed her then. They might have purged the Kiryuuin line with some semblance of grace, before piling further dishonor upon its name.

What did we accomplish, in this hell?

Suffering, in repentance?

The ceiling was beginning to crack. Satsuki drew the Bakuzan Gako from her hip, regarding the sleek, obsidian blade like an old friend. It, with its companion, had tasted the demise of so many Life Fibers. It had carried out her will. And with it, there was one last thing she could do that a pig could not.

She could deny.

Yes… she thought, *this should have happened at the fall of Honnouji.*

Back straight, she poised the shortsword's tip at the right side of her abdomen, and prepared to thrust.

-"*I've always **been** alone."*-

Her hands shook.

She spoke under her breath.

"You liar…"

A lone droplet of crimson blossomed, breaking in a slender rivulet down the contours of her bare stomach.

"What sort of *imbecile* do you take me for, Matoi Ryuuko? What *were* these years to you?!"

The room quaked; the trapdoor rounded. Eyes fervent, she brandished the blade in a hand that did not shake.

"Unsightly… that's what you are! You think you understand me?! You think *this* is a death worthy of Kiryuuin Satsuki?!"

The cluster above was excited by the sound of its prey - thrilled by the energy that blazed to life again.

It should have been more terrified than a tree in the path of an inferno.

"I am a force in this world! It will conform to a reality of MY determination!"

A great crack split in three directions, leaping to span the ceiling. An intense glower cut through the raining dust.

"My little sister is waiting for me, isn't she? So I will use the power of this filthy blood to wipe the Kiryuuin name from the face of this earth, in the name of humanity! *Do you hear me?!* "

A roar of presumed triumph. Through the cracks, a colossal figure was seen rearing back. Satsuki pointed the blade skyward.

"I will not fall, until SHE falls! I will live to see this through to the END!"

The room exploded. A mass of Life Fibers spilled and surged down through the shattering ceiling, swarming hungrily to the figure below.

[TWO WEEKS LATER]

"I wonder… I wonder how that nee-san's doing."

The young woman looked up from the hand-drawn map on her lap. Her brother had paused in the old kendou forms he practiced with the metal pipe in his hands - a nightly routine, as if he refused to forgo the fundamentals he'd so excitedly picked up in an afterschool class that had begun only a few months before the collapse. It wasn't as if they didn't get enough exercise running for their lives… But now the flickering firelight danced across his motionless form, as he pondered.

His sister shook her head honestly. "I don't know. But our hero sure seemed to know what she was doing, right…?" There had been something desperate, even furious, in the aura around the long-haired woman, but it did nothing to diminish the sense of strength she'd exuded. "I'm sure she's fine."

"Yeah… yeah, you're right." The boy smiled. "I mean, did you see the way she swooped out of the sky? Like an angel of righteousness - or a legendary warrior, or a hero from a manga! And those awesome swords she had…"

She shook her head fondly. "Don't be silly…" Her gaze returned to the map. It was true, she supposed, that the woman who'd come to their aid wasn't someone she could picture being killed. "Say - it's been a while since I read to you, hasn't it?"

"Sort of… but I'm not a kid anymore, sis."

"You're twelve," she reminded him.

"I should've turned thirteen sometime in the last month, right?"

"Oh! That's right. Well, you're *clearly* a full-fledged adult with no need of stories, then, right?"

He huffed. "… Well… I didn't mean I'd *mind* you reading to me, or anything." He gave the broken pipe a few more swings. "The place

we're lookin' for was a university, right? I wonder if they still have books there… We could learn to read more kanji, if we have time."

"I'm sure of it. And if I'm reading this right, we should be close."

"How close?" he said, sitting against the ruined wall at her side.

She pointed at the map. "We're somewhere around here, I think. If all goes well, I bet we can find it tomorrow."

"Let me see?"

She handed it to him. "Want to get a better look at the map an 'angel of righteousness' gave us?"

He chuckled. "She must have put so much time into making these, to give to people. She's like, some kind of pro, huh? I wonder how many our 'angel' has saved…"

"I wonder…" She ruffled his hair. "We were very fortunate to meet her that day. Try to get some rest; I'll take first watch. And in the morning, we'll find this place."

"So long as no demons come popping out instead, we'll be in good hands soon, huh?"

"Don't say things like that… but, yeah." Her smile was soft. "We will be-,"

They heard it before they saw it. And they were on their feet, the boy with the pipe in his hands, the girl with her hand on a knife, as a figure leapt from the shadows to halt with a rifle pointed their way.

A gun? They'd met aggressive humans before, and managed to get away. They'd forked over belongings, or they'd resisted and fled, on frightening occasions, from the type who… weren't so interested in their belongings. It was one of the reasons the boy hoped to grow up and build some muscle already, and the young woman kept a knife,

and a can of mace, hidden in her coat. But against a firearm, and a heavy one like that…

The girl put up her hands, and the boy dropped the pipe to follow suit. "What do you want?"

"Just two brats…?" The man sighed. Much to their surprise, he lowered the gun. "The name's Takeda. I'm from a refugee stronghold a little way from here; we saw smoke from your campfire. My squad's securing the area."

"Oh! We were looking for you!" the girl cried, as the boy whimpered in relief.

"You were looking? Don't tell me…"

"This amazing swordswoman pointed us your way!" the boy explained. "Do you know her?"

"Ain't seen that stone-faced broad in a while… but, yeah, I know who you're talking about. And all in all, I'm pretty glad she's still kickin'…" He looked up, only briefly reflective. "Come on; let's get you to the compound. And checked for disease…" he muttered with a sniff, though a smile just curled the corners of his lips.

The siblings exchanged a look, beaming. The boy blinked away a tear. "Thank you!"

"We'll work!" the girl added. "We won't be a burden, s-so…"

"Oi, oi! Don't worry about that right now. You'll do what you can; I believe ya'. I know what it's like… bein' a brat on your own in a rough world. But you two have been through that on a whole other level, huh?" His voice softened. "Good job, making it here."

Takeda had known innately, from the time of the collapse, that all life was precious. But children? They were treasures.

"Let's get a move on, people!" he said, shaking his head. He looked over his shoulder at them as he started forward. "We can relax once we're back where it's safe. You know, there's been rumors of some kind of *demon* lurking around here-,"

His breath departed in a harsh wheeze, a croak on a tobacco-roughened throat.

He was still looking back at them as the crimson hand that had punched his beating heart through his back tightened. He gasped as the color drained from his skin, and his eyes bulged as his flesh tightened over his bones.

"Hmmn…" A pleasured groan, in a feminine voice, lilted into the air. "Humans who've made it this far… who've dodged their Purpose, and had the spirit to carry on for this long… are the strongest and the smartest. The cream of the crop."

The man was lifted onto his toes, suspended by the arm through his chest.

"And the taste of their lives is outta' this *world*… usually."

The rifle thudded to the earth as his eyes rolled back, mouth open as if to scream.

"But you know, Takeda… it feels like the leader who understands the weak was hiding a little secret: he's the weakest of all! Yer scouts who were sneakin' around in the shadows tasted *way* better! What's up with that?! So disappointing I could *cry!* "

The siblings stared as the foreign hand clenched with a splatter, and roughly withdrew, letting the man's now-skeletal corpse crumple to the ground.

The creature that reveled in the carnage was humanoid - in appearance alone, perhaps, even human. Her head was cocked to the side, her face cold and beautiful, much like the angel's had been.

She wore a cloak with its hood resting back over her shoulders. But her hand was black-red as her hair, not only from the gore that clung to it; and the rest of her visible skin, pale, was veined with startlingly bright red. And as her victim's spilt blood gravitated to her form, splattered against and seeped into her skin, two crimson eyes set above a monstrous grin twitched spasmodically upward, deranged with mirth.

Then her eyes snapped to focus on the siblings.

The girl looked to her brother, to the monster, and to the hapless man's gun on the ground. With a yell she lunged.

The fiend watched her grab the rifle in a crouch and pull ineffectually at the trigger.

The girl startled as, with bewildering suddenness, the woman was knelt before her, a hand on the rifle. "Takeda's a stickler for safety," she supplied, flicking a switch.

Her front was shredded by a spray of ammunition.

Quite a few rounds struck - and a few more were fired off into the distance - before the girl fell onto her backside, from the recoil of a weapon she'd barely been able to heft.

A sigh; a pitying look, from eyes that hadn't blinked. A light clinking of metal on the ground. Bullets were falling out of wounds that closed up neatly, politely, behind them. A step forward, as the standing woman's own scattered blood ran in fine streams toward her and seeped back into her bare feet.

"Humans in this world are terrified of being unwanted… unneeded. Abandoned. Yet any gods you ever honored in the old world have done just that, haven't they? Where are they now, I wonder?"

The girl screeched, but could no sooner raise the too-heavy gun again than a clawed hand darted out and flicked across the weapon,

launching it into the broken wall nearby. Steel buckled, and brick shattered.

"Rejoice!" she cried, leaning down to smile madly into the stunned girl's face. "Your life that would have wasted away, meaningless - I came to salvage it! To restore its worth! You're no unwanted existence. To Life Fibers, you're precious! That's love, right?! The creator's love! Isn't that a wonderful thing?!"

There was screeching, kicking, as the fiend pinned the girl's shoulder to the ground, heedless as the blind thrust of a knife speared her gut. The girl stared in horror at a creature that laughed on a gurgle of blood.

"That's good, good! So determined to live, aren't you?! So full of hope!" the assailant laughed, frenzied. Her hair kicked back as her aura intensified. "It's great! I love it! Now let's see if you don't taste better than Takeda!"

The air gave a throb, and the girl's struggles ceased.

"N-NO!"

CLUNK!

The crouched woman turned her head toward the boy. Eyes wide, he dropped the bent pipe. It had dented about where it had cracked into contact with her neck, without budging her an inch.

Then her hand was on the screaming boy's forehead, lifting his struggling form roughly into the air as she stood.

Dancing eyes flickered down toward a slip of paper that stirred in a breeze.

The boy blinked as he landed on his back. Scrambling away, breath quick, he watched the demon lift up the map, and study it. He felt a

stab of new and less immediate terror, for the stronghold's occupants, until she growled two words.

"This *handwriting*…"

She didn't seem to care for the map's contents. Transfixed, she brought the paper with both hands to her face, and inhaled through her nose and mouth. She shivered.

"Still hangin' on, huh…?"

Her gloved hand flickered out, fabric vanishing into her flesh - red fingertips unraveling into threads and snapping to pin the boy to the wall, as he tried to move.

"Don't worry - I didn't forget about you…"

He whimpered, head down. "What'd you do to Nee-san…?"

Her look became somber. "Your sister, huh? Sorry; I killed her."

A wail, of grief. She shook her head.

"No… Maybe 'killed' ain't exactly right. Tell ya' what - I'll let you stay with her. Your compatibility ain't bad…"

He didn't know what to make of her mumbling. Either way, he was rendered speechless as red-black threads rose and expanded from the now amorphous cloak at her back.

"Hm?" she was crooning to herself. "Yeah - I've got a new battery for you. Go ahead and take his big sis along for a little extra juice." She grinned lazily at him, grunting as Fibers loomed up behind her, covering her in shadow. Her hand gestured forward. "A sacrifice… to the Primordial One."

The Fibers leapt forward, disconnecting from her back.

His scream pierced the night, and transformed into a bestial howl. Her look was almost compassionate.

Come with me, abandoned children. To a place you'll never know pain again.

"On a drive… on a drive… on a one-way road to Hell…"

She switched to humming the off-key tune, as she flitted into her home. Her feet were light on the stone floor; she twirled drunkenly, delirious with the reward of joy that said the master was pleased with her work. She'd hit that mood where everything was funny, every moment delightful. She pranced around the cracks in the floor, laughing in amusement as she went. A fully-charged cluster, swollen with power after some weeks on its own, happened to be returning, intending to deliver its harvest to the master; it veered hastily from her strutting path, entertaining her to no end. She reached out to pet the meekly cowering thing, before roughly booting it aside.

When she finally teetered into the chamber, into the waiting Primordial One, her arms were spread as if to embrace the wall of bundled thread. It stirred and welcomed her, its approval tinkering all the more strongly in her sizzling skull as it fused her body to its own. She loved this. First skin, then more, piercing, binding sleek muscle to countless threads. She grinned widely, purring in delight as it swallowed her away from the cold air outside, and returned her to saturation.

Flat on her back, wherever she'd flopped down to rest until the master sent her out again. It was dark, but she didn't need light; her eyes adjusted as needed. And she was lying alone, but she wasn't cold. If she was irritated by cold, the master made her stop registering the cold, since the cold wouldn't hurt her anyway. The master was considerate of her comfort, like that.

She marveled, with a dark, sweet smile, at Life Fibers that glowed through the back of her hand. Every strand of her being, interwoven with the master. Sublime. She might have remained that way, perfectly still but for breathing shakily through her bared teeth, for seconds or minutes.

Beautiful…

Letting the hand sink to rest with a clap against her face, she fell into soft, crooked laughter.

"Wh-*what*… is this…?" she laughed, a tear of joy breaking from her eye. Joy, for what else could it be?

-"*You, Matoi Ryuuko, have the power to* ***break*** *this world."*

"*I won't… !"*

"*You did once before…"*-

She laughed raucously, until bile burned at her throat. The hand on her face grasped, digging nails into her hair.

"I-I… I *hate* this… !" she whimpered, though her cracked smile.

Two boots tapped down onto the broken bridge, bearing the weight above them into a neat roll, a crouch.

This side of the bridge led to Honnouji.

The lone figure stood, a long, dark ponytail swaying in the chill wind. A black trenchcoat fluttered above a long-sleeved shirt and an assault vest; her dark attire cut through silver-grey sheets of mist as she strode forward on her way. It was day, but sunless; a blanket of cloud hung oppressively above, masking a dreary world in washed-out pastels. Crystalline-black waves churned languidly below.

An eye snapped open.

Is that…

you*…?*

Cold lips twitched into a smile. "Don't come…"

The flapping ends of the unbuttoned coat cuffed the air with a clap. Choppy water cracked across the pillars of the bridge below.

"You've lost your way, haven't you?"

Steely eyes were trained forward as she strode on, unhurried.

Two blades came unsheathed.

Two sheathes clattered to the pavement.

"I'm coming for you. This has gone on long enough, Matoi Ryuuko."

"I said I can't fight you anymore, didn't I? If you c-come here… I'll destroy you… H-hehehe… I'll *destroy* you! DESTROY YOU!!"

She'd sat up, as her voice rebounded madly on the walls of her prison of bliss. The smile had returned; her eyes were wide as could be. For wasn't this hilarious?

"HAHAHAHAHAAAAH! COME AND FIGHT ME, KIRYUUIN SATSUKI! Let's put an END to it all!"

-See You-

[img:
http://orig10.deviantart.net/96ca/f/2016/031/f/7/satshonnouj_by_hinata0321-d9pzweh.png]

End

It may be worth noting that canon Satsuki (and Ragyou) seem to loosely share some characteristics of the Sengoku era daimyou Oda Nobunaga, who sought to conquer and unify Japan in the 16th century; and Kill la Kill contains allusions to Nobunaga's story without seeming to adapt it closely (in the sense of there not being clearly analogous characters). The Honnouji incident, a coup instigated by one of Nobunaga's generals in 1582, led Nobunaga to commit seppuku in the burning Honnou temple (Honnouji, 'ji' meaning 'temple') as his enemy's troops closed in. (Hence, the name of Honnouji Academy for the stage where Satsuki would betray Ragyou)

Full Circle at the End of Days

Chapter 24: Full Circle at the End of Days

"We haven't fought this way in a long time, have we?"

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

[img: http://orig01.deviantart.net/bbe0/f/2016/007/7/a/at_the_end_of_days___logo_by_hinata0321-d9n1u4n.png]

Twenty-Four \ Full Circle - - At the End of Days

-'*You have awakened… You recall your master, do you not?*'

"*I do…*"

It's been in her head again. Then it must have integrated some other poor soul's brain - a backup. It would never have risked Nui's if it depended on hers alone.

The figure knelt before the emerging fibers doesn't flinch as a spear of thread snaps toward her, pausing a hair's breadth from a quickly refocusing eye. A laugh rumbles in her skull; she laughs with it.

'*Good girl… And will you **die** for me?' More threads slither from the darkness, encircling her ribcage, her neck, and giving a gentle, threatening squeeze.*

"*If it pleases the master, certainly.*"

Dull, bitter eyes widen as Fibers sink like claws into splitting flesh, helping themselves to her mind and her power. She feels their push, feels her saturation climbing so slowly, steadily, until she fears she

might explode. Finally, the invading fibers split off from the Primordial One; once these are absorbed, fresh wounds sew themselves shut. Her stiff body slackens, head dropping as she adjusts, as sweat pools on the ground before her prickling, sharpening eyes.

'*I need not assimilate you yet. You are fit to serve.*'

"*Thank you…" She gasps as pleasant warmth washes through her body and soul, soothing, liberating, making her eyes water. She grasps her shoulders, head low. "Th-thank you…"*

'*Now… what is your name, Matoi Ryuuko?*'

Her brow wrinkles only briefly. Then her smiling lips part. "I am…"-

"*Asseisha*," murmured the figure seated on a luxurious chair.

[TYRANT]

"My nature… I am the one who will do what must be done."

Hohoho… Choosing such a name as that…

She smirked grimly, as the master's approval bubbled in her skull. She gazed into a dingy quilt of clouds through the skylight overhead; and she shivered, for soon, things would creak into motion once more.

"I am the hand of God. Even if the world is unwilling… we shall drive its evolution to fruition."

[img: http://orig01.deviantart.net/51c9/f/2016/038/b/5/rtyrant2crop_by_hinata0321-d9qy56b.png]

-"*I'm going with you."*

The woman looks back, at the one who has spoken. His lip is wrinkled nervously, but he holds her glare without faltering, hand tightening on a shortsword's sheathe. He is dressed to travel, a small pack slung over his shoulder.

But Satsuki shakes her head. "You are not."

"*Please - I know I won't be much help, but let me fight beside you!"*

"*I need to face this alone."*

"*Satsuki…"*

"*She has been sighted lurking around this area multiple times, correct? Yet she has not made a move on the stronghold itself. I should like to think… she has an ounce of humanity left. She is not prepared to slaughter so many with whom she was even so briefly acquainted…"*

"*Don't tell me you think you can talk to her? After what she's done-,"*

"*I think I can destroy her while that hesitance still remains. I will take any advantage I can get." She turns to face him, somber. "I'm sorry, Houka. My decision is final."*

Tentatively, he reaches out to embrace her. "She'll kill you, Satsuki. Even you can't beat her…"

"*I have to try. And if I fail, the stronghold will need you. Without Takeda…"*

"*If you fail, she'll come here eventually. It's only a matter of time…" His tone is not accusatory.*

A smile, pained. "I suppose you're right."

"*Then we should fight together, while we can."*

"*I won't bring you to your death. Too many, on my watch… have already…"*

"*And what about you, then? Are you planning to go to your death?!"*

"*If I meant to simply die, I wouldn't keep pestering you for inventions, now would I?" His arms open reluctantly as she pulls away, looking up into his watery eyes. "… Look after yourself, my friend." And she walks toward the opening gate.*

"*Just… Tell me you'll come back?"*

"… *I'm happy to have known you, Inumuta Houka."*

Thus is her farewell, to a stronghold of humans.-

Satsuki stood at the threshold, at the Academy wall. She brushed sweat from her brow, and wiped her hand on her sleeve, pausing a moment longer. Finally she shook her head, and strode across the ruined yard. Distant Life Fiber clusters watched her pass, perhaps in curiosity, perhaps in hunger; but almost eerily, they made no move to approach her.

She would not be impeded on her course.

[img: http://orig03.deviantart.net/e08a/f/2016/033/4/f/satsuki_final_outfit_line__ateod_ch23__by_hinata0321-d9qae03.png]

Her boots passed calmly over the dusty, uneven floor. Pale light filtered in tenuous rays through a collapsed region of the room well overhead, into the ruined, debris-strewn chamber that had once been the highest and grandest in the fallen tower.

"'Evolution'… We spell it with 'advance' and 'change,' don't we?"

[EVOLUTION]

"*Shinka*… Advancing and changing… but never to outstrip certain inborn limitations. All things that begin must end. To resist one's end, to drag on without fulfillment or purpose, even in a world like this one… is self-imposed torment. Folly. I understand this now; it took more than three miserable years to open my eyes to the truth of the human experience. Those that come to fruition *must* yield to their due harvest…"

"Does that make your actions merciful and devout?" her listener inquired, coming to halt some fifteen meters away. She raised her head, lower from her position on the slanted floor.

A shrug. "It doesn't *matter* what I am. That's the beauty of my existence. All that matters now is the Purpose I serve…" She shook her head, as her look had begun to grow distant. "You shouldn't have come here, you know."

Satsuki smirked grimly, her eyes soft. "Good to see you again, too."

"Oh, don't get me wrong; it's fantastic to see ya'," Ryuuko assured her, cocking her head from where she sat in the old student council president's fine chair. Her forearms rested themselves on her knees; a bare foot fidgeted on the ground. "Doesn't change the fact that you shouldn't have come."

The light was perturbed with a passing cloud, softening the contrast of the hanging dust it caught. Satsuki opened her mouth.

"You look like shit, by the way," Ryuuko remarked. "The world ain't been easy on ya', huh?"

Satsuki quirked a brow. "And I can't say what I expected to find, when I came here…" Her eyes followed the lines of gaunt cheeks framed by a mane of messy hair, and a sharp chin, stripped of the

trace of fat that might have once made it tender; she surveyed what could be seen of the wiry form beneath her dark attire. Her gaze returned to eyes ringed with malaise, and the expectant, bottomless red pools of the irises that sat in their sunken sockets. "But you don't look so well, yourself. Have you been eating?"

"The master won't have me waste time on somethin' like that," she sneered, prominent canines flashing. "The blood I take in is plenty."

Satsuki's lip twitched. *Fool… you must realize what it's doing…* "The day all of this began, Kamui Senketsu sacrificed himself to give you a second chance. And *this* is what you've made of it? Slaughtering your own, to restore that monster…"

"What's that? Absorbing him, and regaining what I'd lost… it made everything so much clearer! You get it, don't you?" She waved an arm, scornful. "The 'advantage' - it was never ours. It was theirs. But we were so desperate, blinded with hope. We thought the Kiryuuin watched over Life Fibers, when the reverse was true. There's nothing we could do! And now you, a single human, think there's something *you* can do for this world? By coming *here* ?!"

"No," Satsuki admitted simply, surprising her. "I don't. Saving the world, or what have you… Perhaps this was never that kind of story, was it?"

"If you can comprehend that much…" Ryuuko grinned, studying her coolly. "Have you come to me seeking a death glorious enough to befit Kiryuuin Satsuki?"

"I wonder…" Satsuki mused, hands clenching on blades she never intended to sheathe again. "I can't save the world, but there is one thing I can accomplish here."

The girl gave a long hum of amusement. Gloves formed of her own Life Fibers unraveled and snapped into her skin, reabsorbed; and her fingers reddened, slipping into a similar patch of color that blossomed on her forearm. They withdrew with a miniature pair of

scissors, as her skin went smooth and pale again. Her face became nostalgic. "… We haven't fought this way in a long time, have we?" she remarked, slipping a scissor blade's grip into either hand. The sharp edges glinted against the unsteady light.

Satsuki's blood seemed to sizzle. But she took a breath, and shook her head. "I always took you for at least a potential ally. So in my case, I've *never* quite fought you this way."

"Oh? In what way, then?"

"With the resolve that you, Matoi Ryuuko, are the ENEMY!"

Stirring dust throbbed away from her, within the slanted beam of light. Ryuuko nodded, and shut her eyes.

"Pathetic, isn't it? Without fail, we always seem to fall back on *communicating* this way. We bring out the best and the worst in each other, don't we…?"

Reddened veins smoothed, faded into her skin. Wild hair began to settle.

"I figure, the closer you let someone… the more **damage** they can deal. I'm still in that steel heart of yours, huh? Just as deep as you are in mine. But we *are* enemies."

Her hands flexed, fibrous claws receding.

"The master is willing to humor me… So I hope ya' won't hold it against me…"

Bright, familiar blue eyes opened on Satsuki's stunned form.

"… But I'd like to fight you as a human, one more time."

Satsuki winced; for one moment, her resolve deserted her. "R-Ryuu-*!*
"

The chair burst, splintering backwards off the dais - empty, as a dark, red-streaked form blurred near, and vanished.

The air shook, whipping Satsuki's hair and cloak forward as Ryuuko materialized mid-swing, frozen just short of the tip of the Bakuzan Kouryuu Satsuki had leveled behind her back.

"Like a human, was it?" Satsuki murmured flatly, as pieces of the chair cracked into the far wall before her, thudded to the ground.

Ryuuko smiled crookedly at her sister's back, and at the blade's fine point a centimeter from her taut stomach. "Let's see what we're capable of, Kiryuuin Satsuki."

Satsuki's hand clapped on the hilt, thrust the blade back. Ryuuko spun aside and in, swinging a scissor violently around as she and her sister passed eye-to-eye.

CLANG!

A blocked blow set blades sparking brilliantly between them. Steely blue met fierce blue, obsidian strained against crimson, and they were blown apart.

So it began.

-Full Circle-

End

- returning to the origin; going back to the beginning; retracing

I also wanted to note somewhere - the kanji used in the overall subtitle / 'At the End of the World' and appearing here in the word , 'end,' has meanings including 'end,' 'result,' 'complete,'

and 'fruit.' The same kanji is the one used in the most common word for fruit, . This contributed to my choice of the word for the subtitle. It might not be a very strong pun, but either way… Does the world face its end, or its fruition? Depends on who you ask, at this point ;)

Collision at the End of Days

Chapter 25: Collision at the End of Days

"Kiryuuin are a force in this world. So what better way for two forces to relate to each other?"

Warning: See that 'graphic depictions of violence' tag? This is one of those chapters that it's there for.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

[img: http://orig01.deviantart.net/bbe0/f/2016/007/7/a/at_the_end_of_days___logo_by_hinata0321-d9n1u4n.png]

Twenty-Five \ Collision - - At the End of Days

Satsuki did not fear her enemy.

Certainly, she was as wary as was reasonable, and fully conscious of the fact that she fought at a disadvantage. But this awareness sharpened her; it could hardly bring her to cower before her foe, as their blades clashed wildly in a distantly familiar greeting.

If it had, Ryuuko might have been furious.

"You're the best," Ryuuko snarled, before shedding a blocked slash and moving into her own; Satsuki sidestepped the scissor's path and lunged, eyes sharp as Ryuuko parried quick strikes. "Y'know that, Satsuki? You're the greatest, hands down!"

"What a way you have of expressing your appreciation," Satsuki scoffed as they broke apart, mirroring each other as their heels slid a short way back. Gathering themselves, they sprang forward again, blades colliding with a ringing of steel. They circled in their dance, each trying to keep an advantageous position on the slanted ground. No openings, yet.

Ryuuko leveled one heavy scissor forward as they separated. "Don't give me that. This is what we are, right? Kiryuuin are a force in this world. Words don't always cut it for us; so what better a way for two forces to relate to each other? Slam together, and see who *wins!* "

Satsuki held the Kouryuu even with Ryuuko's larger blade, testing. "By way of collision, then?"

"Yeah… I think I'm just fine appreciating you at arm's length, for now."

"This is a bit further than an arm," Satsuki noted.

Ryuuko chortled, eyes glinting combatively with amusement. "I guess so."

The twitch of one foot, and four blades flew together again, blaring out an angry cacophony of singing, screeching steel.

What's this? Ryuuko thought, leaning out in evasion as a cut split itself across her cheek. But Satsuki had overcommitted - a move Ryuuko rewarded with a retaliatory knee strike to the gut. Satsuki braced for the blow, and when Ryuuko followed with a leg sweep, the taller woman twisted into a roll on impact, recovering in a crouch and slashing for the ankle of Ryuuko's planted foot.

Ryuuko hissed as the Bakuzan Gako nicked her. *Her fighting style's changed, hasn't it?* She swung a scissor in an arc, an overhead strike that dropped with a heavy clang upon the crouched woman's upraised, crossed blades.

Satsuki lunged in - the scissor dropped, tip catching on the floor behind her - and Ryuuko grunted at the dent her sister's skull put in her gut.

Ryuuko shut her eyes with a scowl as she was driven back. Opening them, she deflected the Gako that blurred for her throat - and took a graze from the longer Kouryuu across her front. When a forceful, harshly deflected slash from the Gako left Satsuki's back open, Ryuuko was prepared to claim an easy strike when the diverted shortsword's hilt returned as a bludgeon to her shoulder, rattling the air with a crunch.

"AAGH!"

Ryuuko's eyes were wide as her dislocated shoulder strained, as the scissor's weight pulled the weapon from her grasp - and as Satsuki, furiously cold, lunged for her with the Kouryuu.

The younger woman leaned away, foot snapping hard across Satsuki's wrist. The ebony blade jumped from her hand as Ryuuko spun forward from the move, driving a curved scissor handle dead into her cheek.

Satsuki hit the wall several meters back, pushed from it, and charged forward without pause. Ryuuko slashed out horizontally in time to meet her advance - and gawked as her scissor passed beneath leaping feet, coiled legs, as Satsuki's airborne form spun toward her.

The kick landed like a sack of lead across her skull, snapping her head aside and bowling her off her feet.

She came out of a bounce to land upright, hopping back to expend her remaining momentum. "I get it!" she cried, eyes alight with excitement as she pressed a hand to her cheek. "Yeah, your swordsmanship's always been sharper than mine, but you know I can read you by now if you stick to that prim, flawless form of yours! So Kiryuuin Satsuki wants to whittle down the gap by fighting *recklessly* ?"

"A habit of yours that has made you seem even stronger than you are," Satsuki said, reclaiming the fallen Bakuzan Kouryuu. "In terms of damage output…"

"Huh?" Ryuuko crooned, gripping her slumped shoulder. She set it roughly; the dull crunch it produced would have made any other listener cringe. Her hanging hand clenched momentarily. "But you can't hope to soak up damage like I can. And you ain't got near as much practice with recklessness as I do. You better not be countin' on this being enough to beat me!"

Ryuuko drew back, and hurled her scissor straight. Satsuki lunged aside, clear of its path, cloak fluttering in her wake - and noticed too late the disarmed scissor on the ground in the direction she'd dodged, and the blurring figure that grasped it.

SHING!

The Bakuzan Gako narrowly caught Ryuuko's strike; Satsuki was off-balance as the blades locked. With a shove of force, Ryuuko drove her arm back, nearly getting the scissor's edge into her adversary's shoulder before the Bakuzan Kouryuu joined its companion in Satsuki's defense.

"That's too bad," Ryuuko said, barely flinching as she held off a shove from Satsuki's two blades against her one. "I'm physically suppressing my Fibers as much as possible, you know. But I'm still stronger than you-,"

She stepped and thrust her arm out, blowing Satsuki back.

"Still *faster* than you!"

Sweat flecked from Satsuki's wide-eyed face as she diverted a lunge, twisting away from a scissor that snipped shallowly through the outer side of her arm. She lunged to stab, and Ryuuko slipped inside the move, capturing Satsuki's forearm under her arm and squeezing to pin it tightly to her side.

"And I can take a hell of a lot more *damage* than you."

Satsuki's other blade lashed in - her arm was caught in the same manner, as Ryuuko thrashed her way inside her guard. A moment's struggle - and two right knees smashed into the side of their adversary's ribcage.

Satsuki yelled, as pain sprayed across her torso and jolting arm, burned like hot and cold pinpricks through her skull. And she registered before her a Ryuuko whose wincing eyes held her with a grin.

Satsuki tensed a moment before a hand clenched on her skull, her hair - and drove Satsuki's face down into a rising knee.

The world was blasted bright and dark; she gave a pained cry, crimson scattering from her lips as she was launched into the air.

She struck down on her upper back, as two blades clattered noisily to the nearby ground.

"Hm…" A sound of distaste lilted down toward her sprawled form. "Say, Satsuki - you're seriously tryin' to kill me, huh? And that's awesome!" Ryuuko exclaimed, clapping as the woman rose shakily on her side, propping up with one elbow and getting to her knees. "You're the strongest human, after all. But if this is the brightest that spirit a' yours can burn-,"

Ryuuko ducked almost casually inside a sloppily thrown swing - grabbed a belt and a sleeve, and wrenched the taller woman over herself to slam cleanly to the crackling floor. She wheezed.

"It's disappointing, you know!" Ryuuko whined, rising again and propping a hand on her hip. She leaned over her prone foe, feet near Satsuki's head. "We're a *force* in this world, yeah? But it's lookin' more and more like we're a force for the natural order after all. Unless you can muster up the strength to prove me otherwise…"

"R-Ryuuko…" Satsuki coughed. Her eyes cracked open. "What are you fighting for, in the first place…?"

She smirked crookedly. "A name like *Ryuuko* ain't for me anymore - not with the master watchin' over me. This was the way it had to be. My place is here, standing above humans and Life Fibers alike. I am the hand of evolution and fruition, second **only** to the master! The LAW of this world!"

"The 'law'?" Satsuki scoffed, an arm folded across her bruised ribs. "*You* ? Mind the drivel you spout on Academy grounds, *Ryuuko* !"

The younger combatant's lip twitched in annoyance. "Who is it, then? You? Ain't you one to talk, in the position you're in." Her eyes darkened. "Errant Kiryuuin…"

Her hand drifted down, toward a pained face.

"This world…"

Satsuki's hand clenched on her trenchcoat sleeve.

"… doesn't NEED you anymore-!"

Satsuki's feet kicked up - her ankles hooked behind Ryuuko's neck.

She tore a button from her sleeve - releasing a narrow, springloaded pin that snapped around, driving a tooth at its end into her arm. She was pulling a shocked Ryuuko forward over her, off her feet, as the button bounced lightly away, as a blot of red blossomed on her sleeve - and vanished.

A shockwave hit the air, and a crimson haze emanated from a sleeve that grew tight against the arm within it. A hand snapped strongly into a fist.

"Huh…?" Ryuuko breathed, as Satsuki's knuckles neared her midriff.

WHAM!!

Ryuuko felt her abdominals give way, her flesh compact, nerves stretching, vertebrae shifting - an instant before her back smashed through the ceiling.

That ceiling should have been at least twenty meters above her, she recalled vaguely.

… Shit.

Satsuki rolled neatly backwards and onto her feet, hopping away as a bloody figure cracked into the ground, and several tons of broken stone rained down in her wake.

Brilliantly made, Houka, Satsuki thought, teeth clenched as she clutched at her shivering arm. Her eyes flickered toward the ground nearby. The Kouryuu…

She had no sooner reached for the blade's hilt than an explosion shook the room; she snatched up the weapon, ducking behind it in a crouch and using it to deflect sailing debris amid rapidly scattering dust.

She raised her head, cold eyes meeting dancing blue. Ryuuko stood straight but relaxed, head low and arms out, feet planted shoulder-width apart. Her smile was lopsided, but calm, as the blood that ran in streaks from her matted hairline dripped from her chin. Steaming breath sifted from her lips as she quirked an angled brow. "Not bad."

Satsuki's eyes narrowed. *I felt her spinal column crack,* she thought, watching Ryuuko pop her neck. *If she can stand, and move without pain… she can't suppress her regenerative factor any more fully than she can suppress her physical strength.* Satsuki's teeth ground. *I must end this quickly…*

"That's Kiryuuin Satsuki for ya'," Ryuuko drawled, leaning down to push aside some rubble. Her voice softened. "Of course you had a plan. Thank goodness…" But when she rose, scissor blades in hand,

her eyes were sharp. "You'll entertain me for a bit longer, then? And what is it that you've got rigged up in that snazzy coat of yours?"

"Life Fiber skin patches," Satsuki conceded. "Isolated until pierced and wet with blood. You can thank Inumuta for them."

"A localized power boost?" Ryuuko sneered. "But it looks like it only lasts an instant. And your arm ain't lookin' too good…"

Satsuki frowned, looking down; her hand, visible beneath the coat's cuff at her wrist, remained patterned with reddened veins, fingers twitching frequently.

"You're letting Life Fibers inhabit you internally. In small areas, they won't *kill* an adult human, but even as you are now, you'll burn your nervous system out if you keep that up… But you realize that, don't you?"

Satsuki stifled a grunt, clenching her fist as the fibers that had spread into her arm settled. Her lip curled at a subtle smell of singed skin. "Underestimate me at your own peril, Matoi Ryuuko."

"Heh…" Ryuuko hefted a scissor, spinning it by its handle about her arm. She caught it in a sure grip, and slashed powerfully through the quailing air before her.

Satsuki began instinctively to raise her blade in the heartbeat before her neck prickled, and she leaned sharply back. The energy seemed to singe her brow before the wall behind her, briefly denting in line with the strike, burst in an explosion of smoke and flame.

"Really," Satsuki growled, rushing forward. "Is this how humans fight?"

"Don't you start!" Ryuuko retorted, sending a vertical slash rippling out at great speed.

Still advancing down the slanted ground, Satsuki spun aside the plane of the slice, and slid smoothly under a lateral energy slash that followed; as it passed she rose, lunging into Ryuuko as the waves she'd dodged exploded at her back. The two traded blows at blinding speeds, Satsuki's one blade flitting fearlessly left and right about the barrage of her dual-wielding foe. Ryuuko spun to duck beneath a slash, and Satsuki hopped clear of the low slash of retaliation. Ryuuko rose, her other scissor swinging around onto Satsuki's quickly blocking blade.

"What manner of fool are you, Ryuuko? What do you stand to accomplish by betraying humanity?!" Satsuki cried, as their blades sparked.

"It's no betrayal! It's fixing my mistake! The Life Fibers can still *make* something of this miserable, dying world!"

"Do you truly derive fulfilment from such a cause?! Do you believe the things you're saying?!" Satsuki yelled, scowling intensely at the shorter woman as they shoved apart, and locked again. "The Life Fibers were molding you into a controllable asset, the same way I once sought to manipulate you - the same way Ragyou tried to shape me! I know how wrong I was, to treat you as a mere tool instead of a comrade! But after the time we spent together, are you now truly content with simply being used?! Such a Matoi Ryuuko… I cannot tolerate!"

"What you can or can't tolerate is none of my concern! Kiryuuin Satsuki!!" Ryuuko cried, launching a foot into the taller woman's gut.

Satsuki was thrown in an arc, her wind lost in a harsh breath. Striking down on her backside, lower on the slanted floor, she bounced and rolled back, stretched an arm out at her side - fingers finding purchase on a stone pillar, swinging herself neatly behind it on her feet.

Ryuuko fired off a slash that burned wickedly red. The pillar was rent in two and destroyed with the promptly ensuing explosion, bringing a

crumbling area of the unsteady ceiling down on top of it. Ryuuko peered intently into the clearing grey dust, an eyebrow raised.

She turned her head, consciousness given one moment to skirt across the formidable figure that sailed toward her back from a leap - eyes madly severe, a charged and crackling fist drawn back, and a stray button tumbling end over end through the air.

The downward punch swatted her through the floor, through concrete. Her body shot at an angle into the denting ground and bounced, rolling rapidly until she managed to get her feet beneath her, slide, and lose balance again, backpedalling to a stumbling halt in a corridor of the dark basement lab. She shuddered, blinking and choking as her rattled head swam, and her eyes focused again on a shadow that plunged into the dust cloud of her landing.

"Fuck-!" She leaned back as she found Satsuki blurring in before her, her coat trailing dust, the arcing gleam of the Kouryuu shearing a few strands of hair before her widening eyes. Ryuuko swung around the scissor she'd held onto, and Satsuki spun to kick the flat of the blade upward with a passing boot - before the long-haired woman's sword, clasped in two hands, crossed Ryuuko's midsection cleanly as the girl brought a fist to Satsuki's temple.

A reeling Ryuuko blanched in bewilderment as blood splattered thickly to the ground at her feet, tracing out the smooth arc of Satsuki's slash. And in the wake of the dark crimson froth, certain vital components of her being began to spill outward.

Staggering from the glancing blow, Satsuki watched the girl's mouth stretching smoothly open, watched her neck tense, watched her brow pinch inward above wide, dulling eyes. Then crimson light sprang from Ryuuko's slit stomach, racing to pattern the torn innards being thrown from it. Halted, they snapped back with a squelch, yanked into place before glistening threads darted to sew the wound shut.

Her recovery factor is strengthening! Satsuki thought, scowling. *If she fully awakens now… !*

In the absurdly brief duration Ryuuko required to bounce back from evisceration, and her eyes to sharpen again, Satsuki remained off-balance, shocked, silken hair trailing clumsily in her wake. Ryuuko lunged toward her, as Satsuki toppled into a wall.

SPLIKT! The squelch of splitting flesh.

Ryuuko's eyes grew as blood sailed into the air. Satsuki's eyes were fierce.

The Kouryuu was lodged to the hilt in Ryuuko's gut, protruding from her back.

A scissor blade was lodged in Satsuki's side, staining torn clothes with a dropping curtain of deep red.

"Wh…" Ryuuko's hands shook; she hacked out a mouthful of blood, grimacing in shock. She shook her head, fluid rumbling on her breath. "Why wouldn't you block…?!"

Satsuki's eyes remained clear, in a face just slightly taut with pain. She panted a moment, and slowly raised her head. "This world is not for Life Fibers… It is not for KIRYUUIN, either!"

With the bellow she rose into Ryuuko, twisting the blade in her sister's spurting gut, and lifted her with it from her feet. Ryuuko yowled aloud as she was hefted up over Satsuki's head, and cast strongly away.

She crashed into a wall, slumping, a stark hand pressing its palm in shock to the hot wetness of her gut as it soaked into her clothes. "Y-you… you FOOL!" she screamed, blood spraying past stained teeth. "Only one of us needs to die here!"

No! Don't kill her - absorb her, you filthy ape! Use her! Her energy-!

Shut UP for a second-!

The Kouryuu sparked, briefly illuminating the bloodstained wall as Ryuuko lunged clear. "What's your game, Ryuuko?!"

"It ain't as stupid as yours, that's for sure!" she cried, distraught as she ducked and stepped clear of strike after speeding strike of the whistling blade. "Just stop! Stop it, Satsuki-!" She yelped as a scissor blade, grabbed from the ground and spun in deft fingers, lashed across her upraised forearm, snipping to bone.

"*One* of us must die, in this battle? That's what you'd resolved?! Yet you were only half-correct, Ryuuko! The Kiryuuin's accursed destiny must be eliminated, before it blights humanity any further!"

"You're outta your fucking mind!" Ryuuko yelled, staggering as the Kouryuu bit open her flesh about her ribs, savage. "Yeah, I couldn't trust you - so *I* went ahead and made a crazy decision on my own, too!"

-*The final conscious choice, of a human heart.*-

"But no way in hell it's supposed to go like this!"

The blade gashed her outer thigh. Ryuuko threw a backhand punch - so neatly evaded, as electrical eyes tracked her movements like a hawk's.

-*Threats of impulse… the ones even she can't see coming.*-

-*Satsuki, sprawling to the ground, clipped by a blind move*-

-*I love her. She trusts me. But… -*

-*I resent her. The part of me that resents her… that bottles up everything I hate about her…*

It's beautiful, isn't it? It exists to protect you.

Yes…

Let it consume you.

This… animosity… It's all I need, for the likes of her…

So when she comes for you… when you are pitted against her, you will not falter, correct?

No. I'll destroy her. Destroy her, same as Ragyou.

Good… I leave her in your hands… -

"Ack!" she cried, as a slash went splitting from shoulder to hip, as her wounds struggled against her will to restore themselves.

"You wanted to give me a fighting chance, and I'm grateful! But I promised I would never abandon you, you child!"

Ryuuko's hand darted forward, slipping to the flat of an oncoming scissor; the weapon popped to miniature form, and an unfazed Satsuki snatched it again from the air to drive deep into Ryuuko's shoulder. She bit back a scream, batting a hand at the nearing Bakuzan to send it clattering away.

Satsuki dropped her shoulder and lunged, bashing all her weight into the smaller woman's gut.

"Do you hear me?!" she shouted at her stunned foe. "I'll follow you, Ryuuko! So, please…"

Water streaked from furious eyes as Satsuki flicked two buttons from her pants at either thigh, and two more from her sleeves, leaping after Ryuuko's lurching form.

"… DIE!"

An axe kick, left heel bludgeoned down into deforming muscle at the base of the neck.

TAMONTEN

She backflipped out of the move, feet dropping strongly to the earth an instant before right boot lashed out into a yielding, then shattering knee.

KOUMOKUTEN

Left hand drew back, clenching with a crackle of burning power as crimson veins flared across its arm's surface - thrusting the enhanced punch clear *through* Ryuuko's stomach, with horrific force, bursting out behind with flung crimson rain as the girl wailed in pain.

JIKOKUTEN

Left fist withdrew sharply, pulling Ryuuko in as right hand clenched. Stunned, beginning to drop, Ryuuko stared blankly into the rapidly oncoming knuckles.

-"*The sharper the* threat*, the sharper my defense. Your attack was lukewarm, and so I was delayed in detecting it. If you had attacked with the sharp edge, and smelled of the intent to kill, my counter would have been flawless."*-

CRACK-!

Satsuki felt her adversary's buckling neck snap cleanly, under the momentous slam to her face.

ZOUCHOUTEN

She sailed straight, slightly upward and back - spinning clear through an aquarium wall that briefly rippled outward, perturbed like liquid crystal, before smoothly disintegrating glass exploded outward in her wake.

SHITENNOUJIN

[FOUR HEAVENLY KINGS FORMATION]

The sound, of a thrown body's crushing impact with unforgiving stone, and of a hail of scattering glass, was incredible.

In what must have been just a moment more, all had settled. Satsuki lowered her head in the silence, gasping for air as she let fall an outstretched, shaking fist. She retrieved the fallen Bakuzan Kouryuu in twitching fingers, and began to walk gingerly forward. She crossed the base of the aquarium to the other side, dark boots crunching with every step on glittering shards of powdered glass.

It was dark, here, but she could make out a radial web of cracks deeply scarring the wall. At its center was a splotch of splattered red, trailed thickly to the ground. At its base, beneath the column of smeared darkness, lay a crumpled, pitiful figure.

Satsuki's eyes grew, glinting coldly with moisture.

You can't quite die… Shaking shoulders slumped, shrinking as she removed her gaze briefly from the softly wheezing, twisted form in the shadows. Then she tightened her grip on the Kouryuu, and stepped forward, reaching with an ensanguined hand for the scissor somehow still lodged in Ryuuko's shoulder.

Two blades would make it swift.

The screech pierced her skull, sent a jolt through her spine. And Satsuki stared, momentarily baffled, as a fiend with blankly searing crimson eyes sprang like a blind animal for her throat.

Satsuki reacted. The Kouryuu, thrust for a reaching hand, embedded itself instead in a forearm, and was wrenched with shocking strength from her grasp. But the half-broken fiend still sailed forward from her lunge, fangs flashing behind her lips. Satsuki ducked narrowly aside, slipped behind her, with an arm folded across her throat and another locking against her own wrist to secure the hold. Mindless as Ryuuko screamed in fury, she yelled and wrenched back, lifting Ryuuko off her feet by a straining, newly-mended neck.

Ryuuko kicked and thrashed wildly, unsteadying her taller captor enough to get her feet on the ground; she threw them savagely into the ruined wall, in a backwards shove. Satsuki felt the wind knocked from her lungs in one clean burst; she didn't feel the blood that trickled from her hairline until crimson clouded one of her burning eyes. Her world shook as Ryuuko pressed Satsuki with all her strength between Ryuuko's back and the wall, but Satsuki kept the squeeze on her neck, desperate, compressing the arteries meant to oxygenate the brain.

Screeching madly, breathlessly, Ryuuko hacked a punishing elbow into Satsuki's wounded side, her ribs - once, twice, thrice, each one rattling. Faltering, slumping briefly, she bucked and shoved with her legs to slam the taller woman back against the quailing wall again. She slammed her there repeatedly, until finally she pressed steadily again - beating with determined elbows that grew slow, but still firm - with a steadiness that weakened, as her mouth worked, her starving chest seized and spasmed in confusion, her foot slid out. She clawed at Satsuki's arm, head thrashing and jerking what little it could with a suffocated howl of defiance. Outrage. But her struggles couldn't budge her - she fell heavily to her knees, and then flat. Straddling her back, mouth and face running with smeared blood, Satsuki wrenched upward, straining Ryuuko's neck with all her remaining bodily strength, as resistance continued to dissipate, and

her only coherent thought was that it wasn't quick, she'd wanted to make it quick, and this wasn't quick at all.

A hand smacked the ground, flailed up with drunken desperation - planted blindly on Satsuki's face, dragging over skin, squeezing painfully on her cheeks, her jaw. It couldn't find her eye to gouge. Satsuki kept up her hold, intent.

A fanged snarl loosened. The jaw went slack, leaving her mouth dropped agape.

The hand on Satsuki's face tensed… and was strengthless. It fell limply away, on the end of a dropping arm; unblinking, Satsuki watched it go. And to her pounding skull, it struck down on the floor with a resounding thud.

Satsuki couldn't breathe, though she found her lungs ached, empty, within a battered ribcage. She fought to relinquish her hold, but her arms had seized up with great, hollow strength. The silence was deafening. Her pulse still raced.

Ryuuko's did not.

Satsuki's throat burned.

-"*I can hold you up for longer than you think, Ryuuko. I'm your sister."*-

She dropped her head beside an upturned, blue-tinged face, drew in a shuddering breath, and wept.

She might or might not have glimpsed the finger twitch that preceded a number of straight, red-black skewers lancing from Ryuuko's back and through hers.

Satsuki sputtered as she was lifted into the air by the fine, lengthening threads. Then they curved, slinging her around in an arc to slam her solidly to the ground.

A raucous laugh assailed the chamber walls as Ryuuko rose, irises dyed a deep and bloodthirsty red, and power grew vibrant in the air around her.

-Collision-

End

- collision, conflict

Don't forget to feel free to comment

Born to Be at the End of Days

Chapter 26: Born to Be at the End of Days

"I am the master of my fate: the captain of my soul."

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

[img: http://orig01.deviantart.net/bbe0/f/2016/007/7/a/at_the_end_of_days___logo_by_hinata0321-d9n1u4n.png]

Twenty-Six \ Born to Be - - At the End of Days

Ryuuko's slouched figure shook with laughter as threads retracted into her back; her tattered cloak, liquefying, was absorbed with them. "You messed up, Kiryuuin Satsuki!" she roared. "You gave *these* things enough time to wake up!!"

She thrust out an arm; a black-red spear lanced forward from about her elbow. Satsuki dived aside, rolling as it snapped through the floor where she'd been. It withdrew as Satsuki tried to rise - but she cringed, pressing a hand to her torso as blood dripped to the floor. With the moment's pause, Ryuuko was before the Kiryuuin from a leap, fist drawn back.

Satsuki slipped outside the punch in a low stance, grasping for her attacker's hand and pulling it close to her waist; her trailing foot dropped back, and she turned her hips, forcing Ryuuko off-balance. But as she turned in reverse, twisting the captured hand, Ryuuko recognized it for a move meant to throw her onto her back.

Anyone else's pain reflex would have helped Satsuki throw them down.

Ryuuko's wrist broke with a heavy snap, even as she sent her other fist into Satsuki's shocked face.

The wall she hit buckled. Bouncing from it, staggering in disorientation, she registered the figure closing in, and tore a button from her boot.

Ryuuko blurred, dodging before Satsuki kicked. Red eyes glinted with amusement as a ripple of force skittered across her cheek, from the foot that passed just beside it. Ducking, she caught her shoulder under Satsuki's knee, and drove her again to the wall at her back. Satsuki grunted, face pale as her wounds were compressed, as Ryuuko pushed on her leg.

"You hafta' pick those buttons carefully, yeah?" Ryuuko sneered. "Because not only do they wear on you too much to waste - each power boost is limited to fueling one type of motion, one attack. They're pre-set. But I can sense Life Fibers and bioenergy pretty damn well, remember? You caught me by surprise before, but if I just read what group of muscles that blatant burst of energy's raring up in, I can tell where your enhanced hit's goin' before you throw it!"

Satsuki growled and threw a punch; Ryuuko's crooked wrist straightened out, and she caught the fist with a clap, squeezing until Satsuki's teeth gritted at the straining tendons. So easily, Ryuuko might have broken her bones.

Instead she released her, hopped back, and planted a foot on the Kiryuuin's breastbone with enough force to send her through the wall.

Satsuki landed amid sailing rubble in the adjacent room, rolled painfully to a halt - and twisted aside, evading a foot that stomped down for her head. But Ryuuko grabbed her shirtneck, and slammed a fist down into her face, with a resounding crash, sending blood spattering from Satsuki's lips to the floor at her side.

"You settled down yet?" Ryuuko asked, as Satsuki gasped and choked beneath her. Quirking a brow, Ryuuko sensed the patches of Life Fibers sewn to Satsuki's skin; two in her front and back, pierced by a skewer that had probably grazed a kidney, were active, sinking Fibers like plant roots into her flesh and agitating nerves across her middle. Ryuuko shook her head.

"To mitigate vital damage?" Ryuuko guessed, prodding two fingers through a hole in Satsuki's vest to brush over spasming abdominals. "Hmm? It's patching up, after all… but it's a struggle just to keep these Fibers from spreading further, isn't it? So desperate to live…"

"It is n-not… my *life* that concerns me… !"

"Oh? That's right - your brilliant plan was to kill us both, and leave the world to ordinary humans and Life Fibers!"

"And what is your plan? To destroy everyone?"

"I ain't destroying *anyone*, Satsuki. I'm *saving* them," she said slowly. "This life is painful; this world is wretched. The fools miserable enough to choose suffering over submission… I will bring them salvation. The master freed me from my pain, and I can free the rest! What is it you gotta' prove, that you just can't *accept* that?!"

"This isn't *about* me, Ryuuko! It isn't about either of us, but much more! Humans, and this world, are beautiful! They are not deluded - they, too, know pain! If they seek to live regardless, no one has the right to callously dismiss their will!"

"Oh? You want them to live freely, but you yourself are bound! *You* seek to bear the weight of the Kiryuuin's sins on your back - you, alone, were willing to endure it all. So you thought you'd save the world. You thought you'd be the one to take on all the Kiryuuin's karma, and protect other humans, other families, from suffering like you'd suffered. And what are you doing now? What sort of purpose can you serve?"

"No purpose that *you* could comprehend any longer, I'm sure," Satsuki snarled.

Ryuuko's lip twitched. She reached up overhead; a fine thread glinted in the air, and a scissor handle promptly clapped into her grasp. She leveled the blade at Satsuki's neck. "You think I'm the crazy one here? All I decided was that I'm not enough of a masochist to toil against the natural order. And I've been rewarded! I don't have to feel pain now - I don't suffer! And I'm stronger than I ever was as a god-forsaken *human!* "

"You no longer know what strength is!" Satsuki cried. "Do you so readily betray your own words? *Humanity is no weakness!* It can't be - it is what makes this life worth living! Worth PROTECTING, with everything we have! It is the only reason we were able to FIGHT as long as we did!!"

"Able to *torture* ourselves, ya' mean?" Ryuuko scoffed. Eyes darkening, she repositioned the scissor. "Alright. If your *humanity* gives you the strength to fight, then by all means… *fight* ."

The blade plunged into Satsuki's thigh.

The woman stiffened visibly, but held her tongue.

"Oh? That's Kiryuuin Satsuki, alright," Ryuuko said, pushing down through the quadriceps until the scissor caught bone. Satsuki's lips parted; her chest quaked, silent, as liquid pooled about the similarly colored scissor and ran from her leg to the floor. "You never show your pain, no matter how much you suffer. But it's the strangest thing…"

She pushed down firmly, watching Satsuki's head turn her wide eyes away.

"Once upon a time… You tended my wounds when I was injured. I nursed you to health when you were sick… I rubbed your back, when it ached. We ate soup from the same can. And we offered

each other warmth, when our bodies were cold… love, when our hearts felt alone."

"R-*Ryuuko*… !" Satsuki's neck strained, in pain.

"You're human, right? Beneath these eyes, you can't even pretend you're not. So go ahead… you can *tell* me if it hurts."

The blade strained against the femur, beginning to pierce - to crack. Satsuki's eyes stretched wide, and she screamed.

Ryuuko shut her eyes, elevating her chin as the terrible screech died out. "… Sorry," she said, opening eyes dispassionate above her pushing hand. "It looks like the sound of human distress doesn't affect me anymore, after all."

Satsuki snarled; she spoke rapidly, livid. "*No one* is asking for mercy from the likes of-AAAAGH-!"

Ryuuko had withdrawn the blade, and as swiftly dropped her foot against the wound. "Such defiance," she crooned, but even the intimation of pity was weak, as she ground her foot down. "You were always so above it all… so impervious to pain, I resented you. The sorts of things that tormented me, that could have driven me mad, wouldn't have made *you* bat an eye. And that scared me. It freaked me the fuck out! You know that?!" she cried, stomping. "Why are *you* so fucking strong?! Me, on the other hand - you know what's keepin' me in line? If I resist, the master will give my emotions back! I'll have to face what I've done, what I did four years ago! If I feel empathy again, for one more minute, it'll break me! And it's taunting me over what I'm doin' right now, puttin' emotions right at the corner of my eyes, and it's terrifying! But you knew my crime, and *wanted* to bear all my karma yourself! Karma I could never atone for! You're so righteous it makes me sick!!"

"Stop it!" Satsuki screamed at last, grasping at her pants leg, fingers clawing near Ryuuko's foot. "Stop!"

Continue.

Yes.

So Ryuuko pressed harder, as sympathy teased uncomfortably at the edges of perception, obedient lest she'd be faced with standing alone before a floodgate only the master's hand could bar. She watched in naught but morbid fascination as Satsuki's form went instinctively still, the will to struggle wiped clean. Clean, as clean as Ryuuko was now… She cringed.

"See?!" she cried, suddenly distraught, "Humans hate pain! But you… you chose this pain. The purpose driving you, all along, has been to suffer in this world. You should like to have survived until all other humans perished, in repentance for the sins of our lineage - suffering in the broken world *our* blood created."

"Th-that's…"

"You were never aiming to enjoy the life we had, were you? I wanted to dull my pain, but you… For all the guilt, pleasure can only bring you pain, right? To the point that you prefer *anguish* over pleasure? Is this why you resist your nature to give in to Life Fibers?!"

"Matoi Ryuuko… If nothing else, I'll resist because I am the only one strong enough to stop you…"

"You? Strong enough to stop me?" Stepping clear, Ryuuko lifted Satsuki by her shirtneck, until the woman's feet hung over the ground, kicking clumsily against each other. "I'm not sure how I feel about hearin' that from a fool who doesn't even have a weapon to raise against me. You cling for dear life to the power of Life Fibers and your Kiryuuin blood - the things you seek to destroy, you're powerless without. Someone who would choose endless suffering over the eternal bliss of Life Fibers is even more unsightly, more detestable, than Ragyou-!"

Satsuki's right boot fell to the floor, and her foot flashed up, around. A false toenail snipped through Ryuuko's throat.

The grip on Satsuki's shirt opened, and Satsuki was on her feet, heedless of the pain that seared through her thigh as she shoved forward to lever an uppercut into Ryuuko's jaw.

Ryuuko hit the ground and sputtered. Trying to sit up, she found Satsuki's hand meeting her forehead as the taller woman crashed against her; with a roar, the Kiryuuin slammed her head to the earth, straddled her middle.

"My resistance is vileness, is it?!" Satsuki screamed, to the wide eye visible beneath the hand pinning Ryuuko down. "That's what you believe?! IS IT?!!"

Ryuuko grabbed her wrist, tore the frighteningly strong hand from her face; as she did, Satsuki's other fist blazed into her cheek, snapping her head to the side.

"You know what our dear mother *said* to me, every time she claimed my body? She called it *purification* ! She said it simply, like it was normal, natural!"

Ryuuko was stunned by the fire in the usually stoic woman's eye, the bare, raw and deafening fury in her voice. She fought to budge her, as another fist lit across her face. Fibers sprang in retaliation from Ryuuko's shoulders, arcing for Satsuki with terrific speed - and were blown back, disintegrated by a wave of furious ki.

"We *were* right about something, Ryuuko!" Satsuki yelled, laughter cutting in her booming voice. "The Life Fibers needed *desperately* to control our blood-!"

She lifted an arm and bit a button sharply from her sleeve, spitting it aside as her empowered hand snapped straight for Ryuuko's still-mending throat - and clenched, crushing, causing the Life Fibers that

had moved for her again to stiffen and falter away, as Ryuuko forced out a fluid-laden, drowning scream.

Satsuki screamed over her. "They *also* needed to keep us from *banding together*, lest we might ally against them! So to prevent generations of Kiryuuin from establishing bonds of *love* and trust-!"

Her free hand's knuckles sent a tooth sailing from Ryuuko's bloody mouth.

"-to foster depravity, cruelty, and lust for *power* -!"

WHAM!

"-and as a ritual demonstration of *allegiance* to the fucking *Life Fibers* before *BLOOD* -!"

WHAM!

"-the Kiryuuin submission gene's activation was left *in KIRYUUIN hands!!* "

WHAM!

"To be activated-!"

WHAM-!

"-via *'PURIFICATION' ceremony-!* "

WHAM!!

"-in which the Kiryuuin head uses her *own* energy-!"

WHAM!

"-to manipulate the SUCCESSOR'S!!"

FWAM! The floor cracked beneath Ryuuko's head; her eyes were round in horror, mouth agape in a blood-streaked face, as Satsuki smiled viciously down at her, eyes alight with mad humor and malice.

"We are 'born imperfect,' Ryuuko! Do you see?! We're born dangerous - *free* ! And we are to be found wretched as long as the gene lies dormant!!" She pinned her forehead to Ryuuko's, as the wheezing girl tried to shake her, to push away. "So, to show her *devotion*, Ragyou *purified* me… ! Zealously… *Repeatedly*… even if I begged her to stop!! And she did unto me as *her* mother had done to her! *This* is how your master held us in check, and secured the passing down of teachings! It was *Life Fibers* that ordained that a Kiryuuin head must regularly purge the successor of vileness! And with their own hands, from parent to child, our ancestors upheld this sick destiny of submission!"

A blade sprang from Ryuuko's elbow as she swung sharply upward; Satsuki grabbed the arm and threw her weight down, snapping the Fiber sword decisively between Ryuuko's tough arm bones and the floor.

"And *your* submission gene was triggered only once, but still *you became their slave!!* "

"Yeah?!" Ryuuko croaked, forcing her arm free to latch her hand on Satsuki's neck. The Kiryuuin choked on a gasp as the grip tightened below her jaw, and Ryuuko thrashed to reverse their positions, pinning Satsuki below her. "If bein' so much *better* than everyone bothers you that much, how about you do what you were MADE to already, and GIVE IN?!"

Ryuuko's hand reddened, and shifted to the texture of thread. She felt Satsuki's wealth of power, felt at once the intent widening of her own eyes and the shocked widening of Satsuki's as she tapped into it, and wrenched.

The air coiled around them, throbbed.

Then it was still.

Ryuuko's ensuing moment of shock was enough for Satsuki's left hand to slip into her cloak at her hip, and her right hand to dart to Ryuuko's waist. In the next moment, Ryuuko's own undone belt had looped twice around her neck and tugged, pulling her head down onto a cold metal shaft that slipped between her parted lips. Her eyebrows jumped upward and in, a muffled cry of protest sounding for a half-beat from her throat, toward Satsuki's cold eyes beneath hers, until-

BANG!

The pistol shot sent a cone of red into the air behind her.

Satsuki shoved her slumping weight away, scrambling to her feet to take aim with a few meters' safety. A heartbeat of hesitation - and as she pulled the trigger again, Ryuuko's whitened eyes focused, and with an almost insectoid speed she twitched her head clear of a bullet hole that cracked loudly into the floor. She sprang to her feet, twirling once and staggering hastily away. Panting gingerly through a dripping mouth, skin creased about her eyes in displeasure, she choked, and then spat up a fair deal of blood. Her palm folded against the back of her skull, shoulders hunched as she eyed Satsuki warily. But for the moment, the master's control had been shaken. "H…" She paused in the hoarse croak, as clicking noises rattled through the painfully sealing hole in her throat. "H-how the *fuck*…?"

"How?" Satsuki returned her glower in kind, mouth ticking up at one corner. "This instruction, etched into my genes… It appears you can't trigger it any longer!"

"I *noticed*," Ryuuko grumbled through her grimace, shaking droplets of blood from the hand she lowered from the back of her head. "Believe me…" She spat again. "God, you brought a fucking *pistol* ?"

Satsuki lowered the handgun slightly, but remained alert as she spoke. "The ritual… meant to foster in us a sense of recognition for our masters. Only a mature, 'perfected' Kiryuuin is granted the power to stand as an 'equal' with Life Fibers, and wear them freely… because such a subject no longer poses a threat to Life Fibers, nor will they ever again. Do you recall what I told you, those months ago? Our power continually develops, and remains in flux, from adolescence to early adulthood."

"You don't mean…"

Satsuki's smirk was grim, in a pale face. "Purifications are generally carried out to realign us frequently enough that the *dangers* inherent in our power cannot grow - so we are curbed until our energy settles at the age of twenty-two, the Kiryuuin's traditional age of succession. If they are prematurely discontinued, the developing Kiryuuin heir poses the possibility of breaking the conditioning through regular, bodily energy shifts."

"So," Ryuuko said, the master's curiosity fizzling in her skull as she pieced it together. "You're twenty-two now, aren't you? But your last purification would've been forced on you at age eighteen."

"The capability to resist was growing within me all this time. I simply needed the right push to unlock it. And I received that push, when a Life Fiber cluster managed to corner me a few weeks ago. I had something to do before I died, after all."

Ryuuko sneered, but soon sobered. "Still a harebrained plan… But I wouldn't make light of your gettin' this far. You betrayed Ragyou, and Life Fibers, despite the conditioning. Humans have at least some power to *choose* between the things they call good or evil. Where every one of our predecessors gave in to depravity, *Kiryuuin Satsuki* chose the willpower to hold on to what she determined is right. Where Ragyou grew infatuated with Life Fibers, and became a monster, you became the one to break the family's fucked-up legacy yourself. With sheer stubbornness or whatever, that's no small feat."

Satsuki's brow furrowed. "Ryuuko… Don't be a fool. We both are forces of destruction; ultimately, I am surely no better. This accursed blood ordains it."

Ryuuko shook her head. "You think some crazy destiny drives us to harm humanity? It ain't blood, Satsuki. Sure, I'm a monster through and through; the things I done show that much. But at the end of the day I'm nothin' but the dumbass who'd resolved to protect you from any threat… But then, the biggest threat to you… was *me*, now wasn't it?"

"So you wanted to get me to kill you."

"I wanted to give you a shot. If I'd hung around, nothing would've come of it but me snapping again, eventually. And I knew you wouldn't give up on me under normal circumstances; it's not like you'd kill me if I just asked ya' to. So…" She shrugged. "I made things move, the way I could. If I could do that much, I was ready to let the chips fall wherever they might."

"Ryuuko… for something like that, you've brought still more innocents to harm…"

"It was never just about me and you, right? It couldn't have been, after what I did to the world four years ago. So I made a choice. In this fight, I'd kill you, and make it impossible to misuse your power; or you'd kill me, and be free of at least one threat. But that doesn't line up with your idea, does it? And that's silly. You're an amazing human - you can help people! But you really think a world we can't save is better off without either of us?"

"And what do you think now?"

"I think the master ain't easing up again. I hid my intentions behind my hatred, I got its trust an' everything, but I blew it: we're both still alive, and it knows not to loosen my leash again. Sure, it's lettin' me chat for now, but it's got a pretty nasty grip on my mind, so you'd better watch yourself before its curiosity runs out and it decides to-,"

Ryuuko's eyes became furious, and her hands flashed up to send ten skewers of thread arcing and crisscrossing toward Satsuki.

The woman raised her knee, flicking a button from her pants leg - and smashed her boot into the floor, caving it down into the room below.

She merely presumes to have made herself unusable to us. ***Break*** *her until she yields, and you shall be redeemed.*

Yes…

Ryuuko drew her scissors to her hands and leapt through the opening; light feet dropped into a dim hallway, passing a discarded boot as she tore off in pursuit of a figure that hurried down the corridor at a limp.

"Too slow!" Ryuuko yelled, hurling an energy slash down the hall. Satsuki curled, tumbling forward so that the wave whizzed harmlessly above her, even as its edges carved destructively through the walls on either side. Rising from the move, Satsuki reached into her coat and flicked back a throwing knife, and rounded a corner as threads from Ryuuko's arms, zipping forward, grazed at the vanishing ends of her cloak and stabbed the floor, shattering. Neatly evading the simple knife, Ryuuko used the fibers to pull herself forward, an arm upraised against the backlash of the energy slash exploding at the end of the hall. She tumbled in a graceful arc through the air, a foot touching down to push her around the corner. As she did, she drew just short of coming eye to eye with a steel barrel that clicked surely in Satsuki's hands - and she was blown backwards, bleeding arms shielding her face as she shotgun blast peppered her front with pain.

Ryuuko crashed down on her back, in the hall across from the one Satsuki had stowed the heavier firearm in. Coughing, Ryuuko sprang backwards onto her feet from her bounce - passing through a curious, fine wire. Oily liquid dropped from above, splattering across

her form; she wiped an arm across her eyes in time to spot Satsuki lobbing something toward her.

Satsuki was spitting the pin aside as her sister's lips curled on the first syllable of an obscenity, and the grenade's explosion enveloped Ryuuko in a burst of rolling flame.

Satsuki's hand darted back to her belt; as the smoke cleared to reveal a clump of charred Life Fibers, she pitched a chemical grenade across the hall. It burst in a gaseous cloud of starching agent, and the Life Fibers went stiff. Satsuki was reaching for a second starch grenade when a thick line of thread, whipping through rubble at the height of her ankles, knocked her head over heels into the air.

"*Enough!* " Ryuuko snarled, sending her petrified shell of Life Fibers shattering away. Her hand was lodged in the floor at her feet; a throng of Fibers burst from the floor before Satsuki, snagging her thrown form about the torso while driving her backwards. Satsuki curled, managing to tuck her arms behind her head before she was smashed through the ceiling - and another ceiling or two above it.

"Fighting, even though you're only a human… !" Ryuuko growled with the master's outrage, leaping in pursuit as her Fibers snapped back into her arm. "It's impressive, but no less foolish!!"

Ryuuko's arms and back rippled portentously, as she burst out into dim yet blinding sunlight - and dozens of Life Fiber skewers sprang out behind her, angling forward and raining toward her adversary as Satsuki struck down roughly on the ruined field. Satsuki gathered herself quickly on all fours and flung aside, spinning sideways through the air as the Fiber blades crashed destructively to the earth.

"The Kiryuuin clan bowed to inevitability the moment it had matured enough to be shown the truth! It bowed to Life Fiber dominance, and it enjoyed favor! And our blood became that of glorified pets - the dogs who herd dumb beasts!"

The dodged blades compressed, weaving into the form of a colossal fist as it swung Satsuki's way. The woman flailed into a leap, and it missed her, crashing with terrible speed into the cracked Academy wall, blowing out a fair length of it and toppling more. Ryuuko shouted over the roar of falling stone, raising two scissor blades in her hands as the Life Fiber hand unraveled.

"And we forsook all humankind! Our blood, in its destiny of submission, never ONCE chose to rebel or fight! *That* is why we were chosen to be the most powerful - we are WEAK before Life Fibers, made powerless to oppose them!"

Relentless, Ryuuko drew back, whirled, and leapt - sending four energy slashes rushing forward in blinding succession.

"Powerless?!" Satsuki rose raggedly, one eye wide as she drew herself up and tore a button from her sleeve, opening her mouth to proclaim:

"There is power in our very *name* !"

And she slammed her fist down, at an angle, against solid earth - throwing herself out into the air, sailing gracelessly clear of the exploding waves of chaos.

Satsuki rolled a half-dozen times in her landing, struggling get her bearing, to rise again - to see Ryuuko racing toward her, scissors drawing back.

"So *what*, Kiryuuin Satsuki?!"

She drew the pistol; Ryuuko cut through the rounds Satsuki fired as she shakily rose. But Satsuki's legs stiffened; her shoulders shook, lungs heaving laboriously for more air. Her knee began to give.

"That's called a LIMIT! Even you have one! You think just by wantin' it bad enough, *your* hands will bring the wheels of karma screeching to a halt?!"

Satsuki's hand snapped up, as she leaned aside - her wrist knocked back into Ryuuko's, throwing a lunging strike wide as Satsuki shoved forward on a straining knee, bringing her and her sister eye-to-eye, a centimeter apart.

Ryuuko's pupils contracted on their last clear sight, of brilliantly harsh, electrically radiant blues focusing on hers. Then the world skewed, contorted - a prickling cropped up behind her eyes - and it went white, and promptly black, with a grotesque and crushing squelch.

She howled, a mad cry of pain and bewilderment that was cut short with the blunt force that smashed into her nose.

Satsuki's face was streaked in blood - fresh, from what had so sharply sprayed from Ryuuko just then - as she let her hand fall from the heel palm strike, and felt her knee drop her. Ryuuko staggered, stumbled onto her backside, thrashing and swearing as she pressed a forearm incredulously across tightly shut eyes.

"Power in our very name," Satsuki panted in a moment, as Ryuuko began to calm. "I was once so disheartened, when Ragyou boasted such a thing. But you know, Ryuuko… I find myself quite proud of my power, even wrought as it is of the filthiest blood. It is *mine* . I am ashamed of the sins of our lineage, yet I will no less proudly *use* the power of this blood as *I* see fit, with the will I've forged, to FIGHT for humanity!"

She raised the pistol again, aiming from where she knelt; Ryuuko jumped narrowly aside as a shot was fired, and leaned as a blur from the path of another, though she swayed, disoriented, after.

"How ya' think Fiber clusters 'see' anything, huh?" she ground out, arms hanging from tense shoulders, eyes still screwed shut above trails of red. "I can *sense* what you're doin'…"

"Imperfectly."

"'Course," Ryuuko admitted with a sneer, "but you can barely move anymore. Not much for me to keep track of."

Satsuki cringed… and then, smirked. "That's true… but I'm not ready to give up on this fight yet."

"What's *wantin'* gonna do?" Ryuuko spat, disarmed by the Kiryuuin's confidence.

"I wonder…" Satsuki sealed her eyes for a brief moment. "Ryuuko… When I read of the truth of Kiryuuin, in the book that lays out the Life Fibers' commands, I was distraught, and I didn't immediately understand why. My entire life, I had envisioned Ragyou as the face of the enemy. Easier her than some impersonal race of alien parasites that, of course, posed the ultimate threat."

Ryuuko's brow knitted. "So, suddenly Life Fibers weren't so impersonal after all… They were responsible for the suffering you went through, and Ragyou…"

"For a moment, I sympathized with her. That was truly appalling. I will never forgive her… but I *was*, if you will, *deprived* of my enemy."

"The hag died four years ago. You hadn't kept fightin' your fight without letting her go…?"

"Perhaps I had. But… say, Ryuuko. You've always followed your own path, haven't you? And now you've decided, at least in part freely, to become a menace to this world and to humanity… the things I swore so long ago, on my *nameless* baby sister, to protect."

The space around Satsuki had begun to energize as she spoke - first gradually, then violently so. Her hair swayed, lilting about as the warped air seemed to grow curiously thin.

"So if nothing else, here in the end, I have this to thank you for: you provided the enemy a new, and worthy, face. You've allowed me to

fight harder than I remembered I could fight, and you've offered me a tangible adversary to sharpen myself against."

Her radiance grew to amazing intensity, the likes of which would have frozen most humans in awe. The air seemed to buzz, to rattle, electrified by luminosity.

"What the…?" Ryuuko murmured in shock. It was true that she didn't require optical vision to sense the change that transpired, as expansive rays of yellow and orange light broadened, merged and whitened. The light itself began to bend, and was drawn into Satsuki's form, leaving the immediate vicinity depleted and dark, desaturated to a dull spectrum of grays.

And a slouched frame straightened slowly, arms drawn in. The air shook, throbbed, with something restrained. The words that manifested upon her lips were cast forth, soundless yet somehow crackling and distinct, a declaration resounding boldly in the ethereal haze.

I AM THE MASTER OF MY FATE-

THE CAPTAIN OF MY SOUL.

Satsuki raised her head, eyes whitening as a concerted aura blazed around her; it boiled upward in a plume, an inverted cascade, to roll off in fluid ringlets, lighter than air. The world trembled, shattering so abruptly as if to shrink deferentially back from her feet. And in that moment, to sightless eyes, she may as well have stood ten thousand feet tall.

[INVICTUS]

"The *HELL?!* " Ryuuko screamed, heels sliding several meters through earth that refused to support them. She shielded her face with her arms, bracing against whipping air, dust, and debris. "*Bullshit!* You can't even! You can't make a *power* out of *pure fucking stubbornness!* That doesn't even make any fucking *sense* -!"

A blur of perception.

Ryuuko leaned aside, as a fist drifted past her skull.

The air twisted, shattered with a wallop - and Ryuuko was thrown backwards, swatted by a wave of percussive force. She bounced hard somewhere on the field - crashed through the yielding Academy wall - and was caught by a tremendous, barefoot kick to the sternum. The air popped, burned, burst around her and pierced her ears as a sonic boom cracked in her wake - and she smashed a crater into the earth, bones straining to hold together as a wall of repelled water erupted in a hollow cone around her.

Water- the bay.

This is… Toukyou Bay?! she thought, mind reeling as she registered a distant energy signature one instant before it zigzagged blindingly down through Honnouji, and across the water.

So as Ryuuko bounced upward, rotating slowly into the air, Satsuki was boring through a wall of scattered mist to materialize before her sprawling form, coat flared back.

"*Nonsense is how we roll, you stupid fuck!!* " Satsuki roared, brandishing two scissor blades in an outward sweep of her arms.

Ryuuko twisted, thrusting a Fiber skewer down from a hand; it hit the earth fifteen meters below and jolted her upward, so the skewer was cleanly shattered just below her position. An 'X' pattern sank into readily parting water and the rapidly bared muck and earth beneath it, carving smoothly out for a full second before the crevices left

behind glowed white, and exploded with a vibrant outflux of sheer, compressed power.

The younger woman's trembling lips drew back, contorting her face in a grin of excitement as she sailed through the air.

I'm afraid.

A fang pinched, dug into her lip until it bled.

I'm afraid… for myself…?

"Do you feel as ALIVE as I do right now?! KIRYUUIN SATSUKI?!" Ryuuko howled ecstatically, as her clothes unraveled, melded into her mutating flesh. Her skin was wildly splayed in patterns of branching black and red, with pronouncing veins, as she crashed, staggered to the earth; and when she strongly rose, hands thrown outward, the water rushing to fill the space she'd created was kicked away from her again, vaporizing in a vortex of steam. "Look at us! *You and I were born human!* "

Amid dancing hair, two crimson horns jutted out and back from either side of her skull; two blades sprang into place along her forearms, while spikes riddled her legs and back. And amorphous tendrils of spindly, deformed Fibers sprang like black flames from armor-like plates across her form, poised to do her bidding as she screeched madly in glee.

Satsuki's eyes were bleached a searing silver-white, amid ivory skin and raven hair that danced unbound. A stern jaw clenched, and then spread as her mouth opened to unleash a howl of war.

Burning water scattered outward as the two raced to meet.

-Born to Be-

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End

Alternate chapter title considered: Born to Do This

Pretty sure if you right click the pictures and select 'view image' you can see them full size from here, since they're linked to a larger source.

Don't worry, the battle concludes next time!… Or maybe you're more worried about how it concludes/what might happen when it does? Well, we'll see…

Apotheosis at the End of Days

Chapter 27: Apotheosis at the End of Days

The boundary between 'human' and 'divinity' grows indistinct.

Sorry for the wait! Life is a thing. But this is a big (in the sense of important) chapter, so I'd want to be sure it's up to snuff ^^'

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

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Twenty-Seven \ Apotheosis - - At the End of Days

There was something about fighting this way.

At a safe distance, gathering Life Fiber clusters lay tensely in wait, as if watching for the outcome; they were cuffed and tossed by whipping winds, but held their ground, gradually speckling the dreary city's gray horizons with lethargic embers of red.

In the bay, the air cracked with force, a dozen brilliantly fleeting collisions in the space of a breath. At once, as many bursts of water shattered upward in their wake.

There was something about it - about transcending past and future alike, slipping free within the rush, the speed, the violence. The two had always fought each other for their own reasons. And when they fought with everything they had, reason was the first thing they relinquished.

A flourish of arcing, fibrous skewers, rippling through the air - curving to drop in parallel, crashing down in succession, each a fraction of a beat behind a blur that barreled away through scattering mist.

There was no thought; there were no chains of fate that could bind them at such a time. There was oneself, and there was the enemy one fought in earnest to crush beneath her fists.

It was their own, transient brand of freedom - a cry of liberation that rang out to batter defiantly against the trembling heavens and earth around them.

Life Fibers plunged into the earth, caught fast, grew taut - brought their wielder lurching forward, spinning, a missile that drilled into blades turned back toward her and crossed in defense.

Two sparking Fiber blades remained locked against the scissors Satsuki held as her feet slid rapidly back, a tremendous volume of water thrown aside from the motion and the resounding clash. Her feet planted strongly, splitting the stone beneath layers of muck as she came to an abrupt halt. She snarled at the manic grin beneath Ryuuko's sightless eyes, before the younger of the two vanished in an upward blur.

Water began to close around Satsuki, and she slipped aside as Ryuuko's feet smashed down for where she'd been. A wall of spreading liquid rose in a bursting ring around them, climbing fifty meters into the air. Ryuuko leaned back as a scissor flashed above her forehead; a ways above and behind her, the wall of water split cleanly along a horizontal plane, and was blown back.

One heartbeat, as the water began to sweep back toward equilibrium. Satsuki blocked a lunging Fiber sword with a sturdy scissor, rattling the air.

Two. A claw materialized smoothly from the mist of Fibers at Ryuuko's back, lashing forward - caught in Satsuki's burning white hand. Ryuuko yelled as Satsuki's forehead bludgeoned into hers.

Three. The captured Fiber claw shifted in form, twisting through Satsuki's grasp like a serpent to plunge rows of fangs into her shoulder and wrench. Ryuuko tried to pull her from her feet, into a new flurry of fluid blades.

Their images faded as two blurred apart, as the water closed with a roar where they'd been. Ryuuko was grinning, ever grinning; across from her, Satsuki's visage was stern with cold fury, as they drifted through the air above the roiling waves.

The boundaries between human and divinity had become indistinct. There was a monster, a rogue who had been granted powers to rival any god or demon, boasting tremendous agility and strength; she remained blind, but read and reacted to energy, and roughly registered the form of their battleground via the very currents of her nemesis' power around across it. And there was a human who obliterated logic with sheer defiance, a steel princess who had made herself queen; she made unquestionable her status as a true martial artist, an entity who could swiftly turn anything at her disposal into a weapon of the utmost lethality, be it a teacup, a blade, or a sum of power that should have proven bewildering.

They clashed and parted at three locations in the space of an instant before Ryuuko went sailing back with a crack and boom from Satsuki's foot, skipping head over heels across the water's surface. She tried to dip her foot down as it flailed over the speeding water, hoping to sink as she flew uncontrolled - she could hide underwater, lose speed, and get her bearings. But when drag force at last unsteadied her flight and plunged her down, she promptly collided underwater with the slanted bank, breath expelled in a burst of bubbling froth - and bounced above again, sprawling over solid ground.

Satsuki materialized at her back, a line of explosively scattering water shortly marking the wake of her dash as she dropped a solid kick against the juncture of Ryuuko's neck and shoulder.

Ryuuko landed on her feet - feet quickly joined by dropping hands that brought her momentum shuddering to a halt, over asphalt that buckled beneath bruising fingertips. Shaken, she tried to stand, to leap away, before finding Satsuki's hand gripping her arm with a crunch, and a crushing knee colliding with her ribcage.

Her knees began to give; her lips peeled back from her teeth in animal fury. Fibers snapped toward Satsuki, repelling her long enough for Ryuuko to shove away and scramble into the ruins of the city. She barreled unimpeded through walls, through abandoned vehicles packed bumper-to-bumper along cracked streets, batting any obstacle aside, moving far too quickly to detect and avoid them.

A valorous roar pierced the air at her back, knocked her sharply forward on a bubble of compressed air - cracking buildings and concrete for a wide radius before its origin. The air was torn asunder, warped in the moment before crumbling matter tunneled forward, drawn into a column of vacuum and accelerated, sandblasted toward Ryuuko's flung form.

Fibers sprang to her defense, hacking furiously at the jet of flying debris before they were overwhelmed, and hunks of concrete, metal, and brick scattered painfully against her tumbling form before her arms crossed, knees drew in, to bear the brunt of the blast. Swearing, she thrashed her arms decisively out, dispersing a good deal in a shockwave. Her hand thrust forward, palm meeting a minivan that distended and melted before exploding, ignited by a wave of ki. Her other hand followed, disintegrating an even larger chunk of concrete - before Satsuki herself rushed forward through the smoke.

Ryuuko's teeth ground, and her mouth burst open to unleash a lancing, plasmic bolt of ki.

Satsuki vanished a split-second prior. On the far bank, a high-rise building, struck and pierced, split in a burst of billowing flame, and lurched toward the earth.

Ryuuko swung a hand around, energy spraying in a fine, firehose-beam from her palm; Satsuki vanished again from her back, and a prompt trail of devastation erupted along the path of the swing.

Satsuki was behind her again, rushing forward. Life Fiber claws whistled through the air into her path, and she leapt above Ryuuko - hooking an elbow about a light pole Ryuuko hadn't noticed to swing herself sharply down and plow both feet dead into Ryuuko's gut.

Knocked back, Ryuuko staggered, swung with the blade from her elbow. Satsuki's nearing figure cut downward, flowed beneath the strike that lopped another light pole in two. Pivoting from low, Satsuki spun to hack a foot up across Ryuuko's face - rose while tossing scissor blades up to instead snag and maneuver the falling pole swiftly across her back - and thrust the severed edge clean through Ryuuko's gut, lodging the great spear's end with a crash in a pile of rubble behind her.

But as Satsuki smoothly caught and swung the scissors for the grimacing Ryuuko's throat, Fibers snipped like wire through the pole at the restrained combatant's front, and whacked the oncoming blades upward so that Ryuuko, freeing herself, was open to slam a kick deep into Satsuki's stomach.

The woman's searing white eyes cringed - and she shot backwards, cracking into a tall building whose walls promptly imploded with a cataclysmic boom, collapsing the structure on top of her.

And Ryuuko was upon her again, blowing through the falling debris with a shriek of attack as dozens of Fiber claws and serpents morphed forward from the space at her back. Though winded, Satsuki deflected wave after wave with gracefully flashing, ringing scissors before lunging through to attack; Ryuuko's hands crossed to grab either blade, pulling as her feet jumped to impact Satsuki's wrists. The scissors sailed away, and Ryuuko levered a furious punch into a bruising arm, not allowing Satsuki to retreat.

Feet sliding back, the long-haired woman blocked a string of relentless, heavy strikes. Her back hit a wall. Ryuuko lunged for her, cackling triumphantly, arm drawing back with an elbow-blade poised to strike.

Satsuki's luminous eyes grew round as she watched her adversary's blade ripple smoothly down.

-"*How* did *you bend all those spoons, anyway?"*

"*My mind is a castle. If I decide either my castle or my enemy must bend…"-*

Her eyes narrowed, furious with intent.

-"*One will bend."-*

The air pulsed. Ryuuko gave a shocked noise when her foot failed to reach anything solid in its next step, as she was torn from the ground, flung straight into the air.

Satsuki crouched and launched herself in pursuit of the figure that tumbled weightlessly upward. Crashing against her, she knocked her still higher, and the two grappled intensely as they turned freely together. Satsuki threw a punch that was caught in a fist, and blocked a retaliatory kick with a forearm beside her skull, at the peak of their flight. They wrestled for dominance throughout their descent; finally, foreheads slamming together, they screamed at each other until they crashed down on their sides, sharing the damage from the long drop.

Briefly stunned, they rolled apart; wary of each other, they pushed shakily to their feet. Ryuuko swayed and scowled, then lunged to throw a punch. Satsuki's silver eyes narrowed on the fist, flickered smartly - sent it crashing straight back into Ryuuko's face, clocking her clear off her feet. She sprang up again, rushing in with all her strength - and stopped cold, muscles locked down by invisible power as Satsuki held out a palm.

The tyrant shook, struggling to inch her straining claws forward as Satsuki stepped carefully toward her; she snarled and yowled in outrage, as her knees fought not to buckle with the immense pressure her foe channeled upon her.

Satsuki's hand latched on her forehead, lifting and wrenching her around to slam her back to the roaring earth. The woman's other hand was drawn back, raising high and clenching in a fist; Ryuuko read the ki in a single cold heartbeat, as it dropped toward her face.

If that hits me directly, I'll die.

A dense web of Fibers snapped up, tightly enveloping Satsuki's form and forcing her to arch backwards with her fist inches shy of Ryuuko's skull; upon constricting, the Fibers exploded instantaneously outward from the muscles of a rounding back, as if vaporized by sheer contempt. But a brute shove of Ryuuko's ki knocked Satsuki away. Ryuuko rolled onto her feet, and jumped back. Crossed arms swept out, sending a slew of materializing Life Fiber bombs hurtling forward.

Satsuki threw her palms out before her; light arced and spiraled around her in an expanding dome, catching and repelling the bombardment of explosives as her feet slid back. And from the smoke she shot forward, into the air, to drive the crown of her skull cleanly into Ryuuko's gut, folding her sister in two.

Ryuuko's hands fell, and tense fingers gripped desperately at Satsuki's shirt at her sides, prepared to throw.

*A **human**… can't be strong enough t-to-!*

Her hands slipped free; determinedly snarling lips parted to eject a spray of wind and blood.

Her mind darkened, jaw slackening as she sailed alone through space. She sensed Satsuki flip to the earth and crouch, prepared to leap after her. The furrows in Ryuuko's brow loosened.

Nee-san has… become so strong…

Satsuki launched forward.

PRESERVE YOURSELF!!

Ryuuko snapped to alertness.

Her mouth opened in a protracted howl as she threw her hands upward, as hordes of branching Life Fibers hurled themselves from her spasming shoulders and back, expansive, zipping and crackling crazily into the sky.

Satsuki's head turned up, and up, and up, watching a colossal, thorn-lined maw take form at the rearing head of a blazing dragon woven of rippling, semi-translucent thread. Ryuuko slammed her hands down, crushing, to the earth; the iridescent, oily red-black beast stretching from her flung back its amorphous claws, and plunged down in a dive for its airborne prey.

Satsuki's fingers grasped at the air, twisting, wrenching out and back as she ducked her head to shoot toward Ryuuko with redoubled speed.

Ryuuko thrust a hand forward, and her crimson arm lengthened, contracting as fingers snapped to the shape of scythes. They slammed into a protective wall of light at Satsuki's front, halting her.

A gout of flame dropped upon her form, and was promptly repelled, the instant before the dragon's head crashed down to swallow her.

Its entire length slammed down into the spot, twisting and compacting in fluid heaps, contorting outward as cracks of defiant white light pierced and sliced intermittently to its surface - and were smothered again as it squeezed tightly, locked with a crunch of finality.

A disbelieving, and then malicious grin spread slowly on Ryuuko's face. Her tongue slid hungrily out across her lips, as her arm returned to form.

The subsequent explosion kicked her backwards with a hot blast of energy and disintegrating threads.

Satsuki stood strongly at its heart, back straight, teeth clenched with regal ferocity as radiant eyes glowered toward Ryuuko's incredulous face.

Then the Kiryuuin's body shuddered - stiffened. Her aura faltered sharply, and a rivulet of crimson dropped from a nostril, then an ear. A pronounced blood vessel that had spread across her temple throbbed visibly, and her shoulders shook under a cough.

NOW! Ryuuko thought, flipping back to plant her feet on a building's side. She sprang forward, claws spread on either hand.

Satsuki bent backwards as Ryuuko cut by. Flowing through a handspring, she returned to her feet as Ryuuko hit the ground roughly, rolled, and rebounded nimbly into a crouch several meters from her back. Ryuuko's breath was uneven as her feet slid; Satsuki held her stance determinedly, though her back was hunched.

Ryuuko's head dropped as she tore forward, a radiant fist cocked back. "KIRYUUIN SATSUKIIIII!!"

Satsuki's eyes grew. Her teeth cracked as did the earth at her feet, and she turned and bore all her power in a blazing fist. "MATOI RYUUKOOOOOOOOOO!!"

THAM!!

Knuckles on knuckles, splitting against each other - arms rigid in quivering air. Shifting, dealigning framework.

Neither stopped moving forward. Neither yielded - both yielded.

One of the two realized her mistake in the instant before, with a deafening boom, two right arms were reduced to a burst of scattering blood and shrapnel shards of splintered bone.

They passed each other, as if in the motion of the punches' follow-through.

Satsuki's breath went sharply still. Jaw agape, she began to fall.

Ryuuko rounded on her, to receive a spinning heel kick sharply in the jaw.

An unbalanced Satsuki sprawled out of the strike, crumpling to the dirt as Ryuuko cracked into a wall that ruptured and rained down around her.

Satsuki's eyes squeezed shut, and her aura flared - and vanished, like a flame in too strong a wind. Unsustainable.

Ryuuko flailed and staggered from the rubble, her remaining arm hanging limp but for twitching in shock. She raised her head, panting as she struggled to pinpoint the vastly diminished energy of her foe. But she found it, found the agitated ki that permeated her adversary's broken body - and found it stopped curiously, messily short about the right shoulder.

"S… Satsuki… You…?"

Water fell through a patch of dried blood from Ryuuko's eye. Her teeth clenched, neck tensed.

"Are you fucking crazy? What'd you think you'd accomplish?!" she laughed, gripping at her own gushing, too-light shoulder. "Did you think *I'd* bleed to death quicker than you?!"

A scowl twisted Satsuki's face beneath a deeply creased brow. She sat up; she shuddered in shock as her breaths grew shallow in the smoky air. Her hands… her hand, and her feet, felt numb. Most of

her body was numb, slow to respond to her will. She grasped clumsily for her arm, as her head spun to the sound of distant laughter among the vague roar of flames and crumbling things. Her arm…? No, just her shoulder. Her hand was quickly wet. She finally forced her eyes open, and retched on a wheeze. She forced down the sickness that pushed for her throat. She lowered her head a moment, took a breath, and gave a furious scream.

Ryuuko's head tilted back; her face sported a serene smile that didn't falter, at the cry. As it ended, her shoulders shook, and a growling laugh rumbled in her throat before her back struck down on the concrete. The city was burning around them; the air stank of smoke. A sea breeze stirred across her spent form, as she panted for breath, limbs heavy and motionless.

"That was… such an awesome fight, Satsuki…"

The strongest human… Our enemy is vanquished. Good girl…

She felt the Master's pride, and a gift of pleasure pushing at her skull, like a hand patting her on the head while a treat was pressed to her lips. But she was still riding her own battle-high. She shook her head groggily, pushing her reward back. *I wanna talk to her some more…*

The pang of disapproval didn't sting as much as it should've. The Master couldn't have maintained absolute command of her mind, if she were to remain effective in such an intense battle; the Tyrant knew, far better than her master, how to command and move her humanlike body, and that body would be slow, delayed by any disagreement in choice of reaction, if the Master intervened. This the Master had understood, and so it had been left no choice but to trust her thirst for victory to bring the errant Kiryuuin to her knees.

You've served your purpose, it coaxed, pressing harder. *You stand supreme. What more words do you have for her? What do they matter now?*

Don't worry about it. Please. In the lingering buzz of the fight, she found remarkable ease in shaking off the artificial sensations her Life Fibers tried to inject. *Just let me do this.* I *won the fight, didn't I? Please… I want to be the one to claim her. I don't want anyone else to savor in her despair.*

Asseisha, you…

Nothin'll top the feeling of ***her*** *life flooding into me.*

Amusement. It felt the truth, through its sacrilegious synchronization with her lowly and imperfect being - it sensed her anticipation, and knew most importantly of all that she would absorb rather than simply terminate; conquer rather than wastefully destroy. The Master deigned to humor her whim.

She smirked. "I was granted the power of gods… so to stand against me, you *invented* it within your own being. But your human body couldn't even keep up with your brilliance. So like the hope of all humankind… You blaze up bright, even blinding, then flicker and *die*…" She sat up slowly; the limp Life Fiber tendrils that had been hanging in the air around her drew inward, condensing and dripping into a cape that pooled smokily behind her as she rose. She shook her head gently as she heard a choked sob.

-"*Listen to what lies in store for you, Matoi Ryuuko."*-

"The time has come… Do you see, Satsuki? You chose the name 'Unconquered.' You pitted your heart, your *nature* against mine… but mine ripped yours apart, now didn't it? Tore everything you are to the *ground* ."

The woman had pressed a wad of messily torn fabric to her shoulder; she applied pressure, as if instinctively, even while her sight grew dim. Her breath wavered as she watched an invincible being stride slowly toward her, blood-streaked, tranquil, and grimly resolute.

"They said I would fight the strongest among humans, you know. That I would take her power… that I would *kill* her, Satsuki!"

-"*When the time comes, with the key in your hands, you will* ***inevitably*** *submit to the urge to CRUSH the human race, your OWN race, into its proper station - to ravage and drive it into submission beneath your, and LIFE FIBERS', grand power."-*

"And what would I do with that power - power I couldn't control, couldn't even *comprehend* on my own…?"

-"*However the world's life may struggle, you can only heed your urge to bear up your terrible strength, grasp its fate in your hands, and have your way with it…"*

"*H-how…"*

"*How? Hehehe… You will ravish the power of the strongest among humans… you will KILL her… and as you revel in your own supremacy, burgeoning with might, you can* ***only*** *deliver unto this world the END of DAYS!"-*

"Those were its words; that is my nature. Alone, I'm nothing but a harbinger of destruction… But with the Master's hand on me, as its Tyrant, I can be more. I can serve a purpose!"

"Ryuuko…" Satsuki's eyes were desolate as she looked up. Ryuuko's face was strangely compassionate as she stopped directly before her.

"I thought if I left, maybe I could protect you…"

"You thought instead of leaping to my defense to simply let me die."

"That was the idea; that was optimal, then. I know it was a torment - that I made you keep draggin' on with me. So I would let you die. I *said* you shouldn't have come here, remember?"

"Because you didn't trust yourself with me within reach? But you know me better than that, little sister…"

"I hoped, but I never did assume Kiryuuin Satsuki would wilt away and die that easily." Ryuuko's look darkened. "So I thought I could hate you enough that if you sought me out, you could kill me, or I could kill you, and the world would be…"

"Be *what* ? Safe?" Bloodstained teeth ground weakly. "Have you taken a look at the state humans exist in? We're going nowhere!"

"And that's why I needed to make things *move* . As long as we exist, as humans cursed to crave flux and progress and evolution, sitting still forever is even worse than death. But, you know…"

Her grin broadened.

"Maybe it *is* better, all in all, to make the whole world move, instead of just closing the book on the two of us. Karma be damned; it'd just be selfish, simple as that. You and I, forces in this world… and in the face of adversity, your ki has strengthened exponentially, exploded beyond all belief. You so violently effloresced, with all the dangers that should have been long since stripped away; you struck down common sense, restructured your own biological limitations, and effected *self-evolution* out of sheer willpower. Do you understand how ridiculous that is? You, Kiryuuin Satsuki, are a living, breathing miracle. As of the last ten or so minutes, your energy has outstripped even Ragyou's in potency. I can still feel it in you… resting, but prime, so ripe for the harvest…"

"So wh-what are you going to *do* ?" Satsuki ground out, shaking with fatigue.

"The only thing we *can* do. This world, winding down into a slow, ugly death… You and I ain't got the power to *save* it at all, Satsuki. We were given the power to put it out of its *misery!!* "

The air throbbed around Ryuuko, as her intent became clear; Fibers constricted about her, piercing her, as the Master's outrage shrieked through her skull. Satsuki watched in horror as the Fibers attempted to bind Ryuuko. But the younger woman shunted the Master's influence, and drove them back, thrashing free with brute, mad, unbridled contempt as the earth rocked beneath them.

"You know what pisses me the fuck off?!" Ryuuko cried. "The *parasites* that fucked around with my *brain* like a brat torturing insects! I hate them, I hate the lofty shit they spit down at me, and I hate more'n anything their goddamned higher PURPOSE!!"

Sharp teeth crackled and bled below sightless eyes; a mane of dark hair whipped wildly above them. "They'll complete the Cocoon Sphere Genesis of the Earth over my dead body! The **power** we have… is the power to DENY!! *That's* what I'm gonna use you for - *Satsuki!* "

Satsuki's eyes grew.

Then the air gave a thunderous crack, and was still. Ryuuko stood strong, grinning savagely as her Life Fibers settled at her command, and the Primordial One's cries pattered ineffectually at her skull, like so many pebbles chucked against a castle wall of rage. She reached out suddenly to the woman before her, hand clapping to her cheek, gripping her hair at the roots.

But then she bent down toward her, pressing her forehead to hers; her hand softened, passing bruised skin like a caress. Her words were easy as her hapless, suddenly lopsided grin.

And her beautiful heart, in lieu of her Kiryuuin blood, thirsted for chaos, for oblivion.

"Whaddaya' say, Satsuki…?"

For the annihilation of all they had ever or could ever know.

"Want to bust up this shitty world, with me?"

Satsuki felt the pull on her power; she felt Ryuuko's vision at the heart of her being, a vision of oceans of fire and ash, the sight pervading her as their auras intertwined. An edge grew apparent just before her; she could at once drop into the bliss, could grant her sister the power of destruction. So simple. They could be a part of something larger than their lives; they could join themselves and deny their ultimate enemy its harvest of an entire planet, a planet she and Ryuuko together could make crumble.

Satsuki found herself returning her sister's smile. Her lips parted simply, her eyes soft.

"No."

Ryuuko's expression fell. Then it twisted in bewildered rage.

Desperately she tore at Satsuki's power - and was thwarted sharply, as the air sparked with her repulsion. Ryuuko had flinched back, mind racing emptily, wheels spinning and sparking in incomprehension as a grimace bared her fangs.

And with a wordless scream, she raised a hand that burst grotesquely with bleeding claws, drawing back and rushing forward again to swing for the strengthless figure before her.

Said figure shoved toward her, rising within her guard - and slung her arm tightly around Ryuuko, as their bodies met.

It was still. Ryuuko's face - confusion bleeding into terror, into self-loathing.

"Don't run away," Satsuki urged, her chin pressing over Ryuuko's shoulder; her arm held tighter as the girl's body shook. "There's a different way, Ryuuko. There has to be. For so long, I survived with you… But now, as your older sister, I *refuse* to give up with you!"

"Y-you're a fool - a *fool*… !"

Satsuki shushed at the whimper that reached her ear as Ryuuko shook her head nervously. "We met so many people in this world, Ryuuko… We went through so much, didn't we? I won't help you obliterate the place we shared so much in."

A snarl. Life Fibers arced around from Ryuuko's back, poising like blades over Satsuki's. The woman didn't flinch even when a shuddering hand folded across the back of her neck, claws needling at her throat. "You've grown f-fond of… th-this miserable place…?"

"It's the place I shared with you… a place we dreamt of protecting."

"Those were just *dreams* !"

Wetness dripped from about Ryuuko's claws as pressure mounted at Satsuki's neck. "Why can't we make them more? Because your *nature* is to destroy?" She shut her eyes. "That's not true. You won't hurt me right now, Ryuuko."

"How are you so damned sure?"

"I believe in you, and so it is certain."

A gasp. Satsuki's hand stroked her back.

"Your self-doubt is the only enemy that can truly shake you. But might you put faith in my confidence, one more time?"

"You…" Ryuuko lowered her head on her shoulder, even as her hand struggled with an impulse to crush the column of her neck. She could; it would be easy now. They both knew it. Satsuki was weak - unguarded, and so, so weak… "I-I'll… !"

"Let your *actions* decide the truth of your nature. Will you strike me down now, while I embrace you in trust?" She took a breath. "… If so, go ahead, Ryuuko. *Kill* me."

Ryuuko's hand clenched - and opened sharply, claws shrinking away as she folded her arm across Satsuki's back and held onto her like something more precious than life.

She bit back a sharp sob that pushed through her gritted teeth.

She felt pain - so much pain, with every drop of remorse and grief she was due. It should have been more than enough to break her.

But she also felt the woman in her arm, so terribly weak and strong, and that woman's steadying arm folded snugly around her, patting her back.

She was stronger than she'd known.

They fell to their knees together; her head tilted upward in a moment of miraculous, sniffling peace.

"I'm h-home, Nee-san."

"Welcome back, you horrid child."

Ryuuko gave a fond, watery smile.

Her neck tensed. Suddenly her horns vanished, while the shell-like armor patterning her form faded into her flesh. She stiffened as a roar of outrage shrilled wrathfully through her mind, a twisting symphony of discordant voices that somehow lashed into the form of venomous words:

hHow dAaRE YoUu??

"Ryuuko?!" Satsuki called - but her attention quickly snapped elsewhere. She watched the Life Fiber clusters that had scattered in wait about the city contort, stretch skyward, and launch toward them with a cacophony of wild shrieks, homing in the form of spears.

Ryuuko writhed, hand seizing over an ear with a cry of pain.

You DARE to stand against me?! Learn your place! ASSEISHA!!

A hand clapped heavily to the earth. She bristled, lips drawn back from her teeth.

Satsuki watched as the javelins neared, burning shockwaves expanding in their wake.

And she felt cloth rising over Ryuuko's bare form, as the girl rose to her feet.

Ryuuko's mouth stretched open with a yell as bone and flesh cracked down from a rippling and solidifying shoulder, and her arm snapped strongly to form as she stomped a foot in sturdy clog shoes. Her back straightened with an outward sweep of the regenerated limb, sending the oncoming Fibers shattering away with tremendous force.

Satsuki's eyes widened.

The gold-studded, high-collared black overcoat tethered across Ryuuko's shoulders listed and cracked in the wind; stars glinted at a belt over plain pants and a sleeveless top. The now fully-clothed young woman reached up, adjusting the visor of a tattered cap to reveal a fierce snarl set beneath blinded eyes.

"My name… is *Ryuuko!!* " she bellowed, jerking a thumb toward her brow. "And the *friends* inside my head are pretty damn strong!!"

She stood unflinching as more Life Fiber clusters cropped up on the horizon; they grouped and swarmed, consolidating as they neared. She raised her arms, and the handles of two spinning scissor blades snapped into her palms.

Watch over me for a second, if you can…

At her side, Satsuki rose with some effort to her feet; Ryuuko's scowl softened. "Sis, you…"

Satsuki's grimly combative aura drew Ryuuko's attention from her maimed shoulder. "Don't worry about me yet." Her gaze turned away from the approaching Fibers, toward the mountain of Honnouji in the bay. "I won't die before I've had a chance to chew you out! But before that…"

Ryuuko reached out to Satsuki's arm; cloth sprang from her fingers, stretching snugly about her shoulder and opposite side to bind the wound, and better staunch the flow of blood. Only then, suppressing a vengeful smirk, did Ryuuko turn her head, trusting the direction of Satsuki's gaze. "Alright…"

We might die… we might fail to do a thing.

Her grip on the scissors clenched. *We might screw up all over again. But, still…*

"The Enemy waits at Honnouji!" she proclaimed, grinning as the two stood tall, side-by-side.

We'll make things move… If nothing else, we'll shake things up.

Ryuuko raised her head. "Let's give 'em a good taste of what *humans* are capable of!"

Satsuki's agreement was fierce. "And let us also give them HELL!!"

-Apotheosis-

End

Comments welcome as always!

Here with You at the End of Days

Chapter 28: Here with You at the End of Days

"The two of us are the glitch in your program. You didn't expect us. You can't use us. You don't know how to deal with us. And we terrify you."

After all the effort to upddate at a regular pace, I'm sorry for such a wait for this of all chapters ;-; Funny thing is, I accidentally left one of my spiral notebooks in Texas when I went back to Colorado for school after a visit home, and was missing a climactic part of this chapter that I'd written out in it; the climax of the story was in the older notebook, while the rest of the chapter was in a notebook I had with me. I tried rewriting the missing scene from memory, but it didn't feel right and I knew I was forgetting some points, so I decided to wait. Finally I'm back in Texas, and was able to complete it properly. It might sound ridiculous, but a lot of work has gone into this story and I wanted to finish it right.

Other announcements - I've made an art-only tumblr sideblog to better organize illustrations. The url is **kurougadraws.tumblr.com**, and in addition to having the 'ateod' tag like before, all AtEoD works that have appeared in-story are tagged with the chapter they appear in. For instance, if you add **/tagged/ateod-ch1** to the url, you'll see all chapter 1 art.

Finally, I intend to take some **story art requests** as a thank-you for reading. If you have a scene or moment from any point in the story you'd like to see illustrated, send your suggestion my way (here, tumblr, deviantART, anywwhere really) and I'll see what I can do with it; I'll start working on them after I post the epilogue, so don't worry about slowing down the final update. I did the same thing for my old

Naruto story as it was ending and only got a few requests, so I'm not anticipating numbers being an issue; but let's say I'll guarantee the first four requests I get, if I get that many. Good deal, right? Put me to work!

Alright, that's enough of me babbling. Without further ado…

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

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Twenty-Eight \ Here with You - - At the End of Days

Doorways flashed quickly by as his boots slapped over the hallway floor. Within each dark classroom he passed, silhouettes framed dull windows, forms set apart by the burnt-red glow suffusing each rectangular opening. Their figures held rifles, hoisted against shoulders or perched idly in window frames, and some had swords tethered to their hips. Some were crouched, peering through scopes, sharply illuminated in flashes of light before thunder rattled the building. But none fired their weapons. Few so much as moved. They watched with shoulders low, with measured breaths, anxious, subdued, or forlorn as lightning glinted on large eyes and nervous sweat.

The end of the hall. The man tore into the stairwell, ascending - sprawling when a vigorous quake spiked through the more minute rumblings that had escalated to a steady, shaking growl. Grasping at the railing, pushing skewed glasses back into place, he hurried on.

He didn't burst into the light of midday, as he ought to have upon shoving through the door to the roof. The sky was a sea of coarse, sooty black. The wintery air was charged and thick. A handful of tornadoes churned in the distance, languidly roaming funnels seeming to drill the dark heavens into the earth. Sheets of rain cast themselves temperamentally down in one direction and the next, kicked about by uneven winds.

When Houka skidded to a halt on slick tiling, by the others near the rooftop's edge, and bent to brace his hands on the wall, the breath vanished from his chest, as if snatched away by the whistling, burning-cold wind. Short hair whipping about, shoulders slumping, he stared bleakly through the streaks of rain splaying animatedly across dusty lenses.

Rivers of crimson-black sprawled above the cracking earth, swift and engorged, dominating the landscape as far as he could see; they sparked and hummed over ghoulish howls, their ominous glow dyeing the atmosphere a deep carmine red.

They flowed with incredible speed in the direction of Toukyou.

"Life Fibers?" he breathed, appalled.

"This is the end…" The listless man beside him had been Takeda's second-in-command. He slumped until he sat, a hand rising to run fingers over a patchy buzz-cut. "The End Times… something ridiculous like that is happening, isn't it?"

Houka's teeth clenched. "That's-!"

A blinding crash of lightning at their backs, and the radio tower, with a large deal of the roof, shattered brilliantly in billowing flame.

Scowling, Houka looked from the fire; his eyes fell on the garish crimson concentrating at a point on the horizon.

Lady Satsuki…

His fists clenched. "Everyone, off the roof! Kobayashi, gather your squad for firefighting protocol! Kazuo, I want the third through sixth sniper units assembled and ready if any of *those* come toward us!"

"R-roger!"

"Shibasaki, get close-quarters squads Alpha and Delta stationed at key entry points!"

"What can we do against that?!" the old second-in-command cried. "We ain't no heroes! We're nothing next to that! If they feel like stoppin' by for a snack on the way to wherever it is they're headin', what're some cheap rounds and swords gonna' do?!"

Houka stood imperiously before the taller man, his glower severe over the edges of his glasses. "We'll fight. And we'll *find out* rather quickly what we can do, now won't we? Now, MOVE!" he shouted, and the people rushed for the stairwell, to carry out his commands.

He shook his head. *I'll do my part. Wherever* you *are right now… Godspeed.*

"OUTTA' OUR WAY! *ORA ORA ORA ORA ORAAA!!* "

Running up a Honnou Town street, Ryuuko jumped and spun the scissor blade, hacked through an oncoming Life Fiber cluster bounding up at her side, and batted another sharply away with a mangled street sign, sheet aluminum cracking through the adhesive plastic of a pictogram that went careening from the post. Keeping close to her, Satsuki turned to swing the other scissor through a throng of launched skewers at their back, staggering briefly at the glancing impact before racing to trail her sister.

Up ahead, a building shattered into the path, and a clumsily-built megacluster rolled out in its wake; it dashed a claw-like appendage over the street to send hunks of concrete toward them. Satsuki lunged into Ryuuko - who'd prepared to move for the cluster without

anticipating the range of the projectiles - and tackled her to the ground, letting a sizeable piece of debris sail harmlessly over their heads. The two rose, panting, as the cluster before them howled and pounced. Several more leapt from the city below, arcing for their location.

Ryuuko hurled the street sign like a javelin, and flung out her arms. A dozen threadlike spears sprang from the flaring coat at her back, piercing each target midair. A glow rose from each darkening cluster's core.

"*HISSATSU!* "

[CERTAIN KILL]

Satsuki ducked, shielding her face with her arm as the clusters swelled and burst, each a blinding starburst of light; the energy, and a number of lingering, bright-red fibers, collapsed inward, fusing cleanly with Ryuuko's form.

"SAIGAI DANZETSU!"

[CALAMITY BREAKER]

Ryuuko fell to one knee, briefly disoriented. Satsuki's gaze flickered nervously across the vicinity and back, finally falling on the bay below.

The water glowed red well into the distance, with dense rivers of clambering Fibers that swept up onto the mountain of Honnouji.

"There's no *end* to them," she growled under her breath.

"I can't make heads or tails of their numbers," Ryuuko panted, voice loud over the sounds of the storm. "The signals are everywhere; it's just a blur. I can't make any of 'em out clearly until they're right on top of us…" She reached up; Satsuki took her hand, hauling her to her feet. "Gimme that scissor for a second," she said, accepting the handle promptly pressed into her palm. "They're below us, right?"

"Yes," Satsuki confirmed, gesturing with a hand. "The greatest concentration approaches from-,"

With a grunt of effort, Ryuuko hefted the scissors and swung down, rattling the air. A shockwave battered into the climbing ranks of amorphous red, sending them tumbling downhill with a landslide that picked up buildings in an avalanche of ruined foundations.

Satsuki grabbed for Ryuuko's shoulder as the younger woman began to stumble; the two teetered a few steps and caught balance again. Shakily, Satsuki eyed her companion; beneath the shadow of her cap, her tensely grinning face was glossed with chill rain and sweat, glistening as lightning cracked from dark thunderheads above.

The door of a small house barged inward with a kick; the two staggered through, toppling to the dusty floor together and gasping for breath. Rain and wind whipped through from outside, swinging the door wildly on its hinges before Satsuki's foot flailed out and scrabbled to boot it shut.

"H-how…" Ryuuko coughed for a few moments. "How high up are we now?"

"Halfway at best," Satsuki muttered into her shoulder, otherwise motionless.

Ryuuko swore. "We'd be closer if *someone* hadn't kicked me straight from the academy to the bay."

"I'd be faster without a stab wound to the thigh."

"You slit my stomach."

"*You* recovered immediately."

"You stabbed me with a *streetlight* ."

"You'd simply cut it at such a perfect angle while you were attempting to bisect me."

"That bullet through my throat? That *really* fucking hurt, if you were wondering."

"If I recall, you were being *rather* unreasonable, little sister," Satsuki noted, bopping Ryuuko's chin weakly with a fist.

"… Yeah," Ryuuko conceded.

Satsuki shook her head. "Let's hope their 'vision' is as hampered by their numbers as yours is. If they catch up to us…" She cringed, breath shaking as she trailed off.

"Your wound's opened up…" Ryuuko could feel the blood seeping down from Satsuki's quadriceps. "How've you even been running this long?"

"This is n-nothing…"

"And…" A sprawled arm pulled inward; Ryuuko's hand brushed cautiously over Satsuki's shoulder, barely a touch. In a moment her hand twitched away, her face a scowl of remorse. "Does… does it hurt?"

"What do you think?"

"Sis, I…"

Satsuki shushed, fingers running into Ryuuko's tousled hair beneath her cap. "I'll be fine. I can put up with this much until we've done what we need to do."

Ryuuko took another heavy breath. "Sis… Do you ever wonder what it'd've been like, if we'd grown up normal? Had a normal life, normal problems…"

"Ryuuko…?"

"A normal family, normal parents… no aliens, no experiments, no crazy schemes or struggles for the fate of the planet. You and me would've competed in sports, and worried about grades and school drama, and career paths… We'd have gone shopping, and hung out with friends, talked about love and heartbreak… We'd make normal mistakes, and come out stronger for 'em… If we got pissed at each other, we'd have normal sibling fights. Whatever those are…"

"That sounds just lovely…" Satsuki said dryly. "But it's not the world in which we live, Ryuuko."

"But imagine it for a sec! I want a world where my worries are, are… rent, and remembering to pay bills… gettin' to work on time… learnin' to drive a car, and dealin' with car troubles. I wanna' worry about normal adult stuff! Like… mortgages! Yeah! What even *are* those?" she laughed.

"A mortgage is a type of loan…" Satsuki found herself laughing as well, however feeble, tired eyes crinkled at the corners and brimming with moisture. Her forehead pressed to Ryuuko's cheek. "It's nonsense… Even if we win this fight, and grow old and gray, society will hardly return to the way it was quickly enough for us to worry about most of those things."

"Even still," Ryuuko said. "Right about now… that's the kinda' not-so-shitty world I wanna fight for. The first step's in front of us… to a world where people don't have to fight Life Fibers for the right to live their lives…"

Satsuki pushed herself up, off of her. "You child… You really are back, aren't you?"

"Sure as hell hope so," Ryuuko said, jabbing a thumb to her temple. "The friends I've got with me… they have a pretty solid feel for the real me. They're holdin' me steady. Long as I've got them, the Enemy can't shake me."

"You've come to terms with the past, then…" Satsuki eyed the former Fight Club President's uniform that adorned her sister.

When Ryuuko sat up, she was surprised to detect Satsuki offering her hand.

"I'm not afraid anymore. And you're not, either, are you?"

With a solemn half-grin, Ryuuko took her hand.

Only Kiryuuin possess a distinct, genetic instruction encouraging them to submit to Life Fibers, Satsuki thought. *But we have the choice to withhold or relinquish our power.*

It's strange. Life Fibers can consume most humans freely… but the carefully-bred Kiryuuin needed to be conditioned *to willingly submit.*

Satsuki's lips parted serenely, her head tipping slightly back. Ryuuko's hair stirred upward, dusted in vibrant undertones of blue. Power flowed smoothly between them.

Ryuuko felt the warmth of the hand in hers. *You couldn't strengthen me if I didn't believe in myself. And as long as we stayed hung up on seeing opposition in our natures, as a Life Fiber being and a human, our hearts would never truly be in sync. But it really shouldn't be a surprise that here, united by a goal, bonded by trust…*

"*Your power feels the best, this way,"* Ryuuko said affectionately, opening electrically blue eyes on her sister's kind face. She could have beheld her for an age; even pale and streaked with dirt and

blood, that face was a fine first sight for her restored eyes. But Ryuuko rose, steadying the taller woman as she swayed. *"The synergy's so intense, our friends outside have caught on."*

"If we can cut off the head of the beast, we might not need to deal with the small fry."

"*It's worth a shot,"* Ryuuko said, raising an arm above them. *"Hold onto me for a second. I'm gonna jump."*

Life Fibers were leaping for the small house when it exploded outward, raining debris in the wake of a leaping blur that sailed toward the peak of Honnouji. Beneath them, a sea of red rose slowly against the mountain; above, lightning shone on the contours of spiraling, ash-colored clouds.

Their hair streamed back behind them. Ryuuko's fingers furrowed against the side of the woman in her arms. Satsuki's arm, draped behind Ryuuko's neck, tightened briefly in answer as they arced over the academy field.

The younger sister, one arm still secure under Satsuki's legs, flung her other palm forward as they fell. Sparks lit the air about her hand; then raw energy lanced down in a blinding wave, striking and decimating former Honnouji Academy grounds. When the light faded, the sisters were descending through collapsing, crumbling earth, into a steep-sided cavern nestled deeply into the mountain's peak.

Their descent slowed, and Satsuki swung her legs out; two pairs of feet met the rugged floor in the same moment. Lightning skirted the rounded edges of the cavern well above; rubble fell around them as Ryuuko trained her eyes on the vibrant, red-orange amalgamation of Fibers gathered near the far wall, a story tall, sitting bloated and immobile on a cup-like dais of stone.

[HUSK OF THE PRIMORDIAL LIFE FIBER]

"Hello, *Master*," Ryuuko spat, lip curled in a sneer as her hair settled again. A monstrous growl sounded in her skull.

YyYoUrRre mMaKkiInG aA MiSsTTaAKkeE- -

A half-dozen Life Fiber clusters sprang from the shadows behind it, barreling toward the sisters along the craggy earth. Satsuki stepped forward, sweeping her arm strongly out.

The clusters were repulsed, blasted back into cracking walls. Ryuuko raced past her sister and leapt forward, brandishing two scissor blades in hand.

"Ryuuko-?!"

"We're pressed for time, right?!" she cried, dropping toward their main target. "For now, observe how it reacts! If this don't work, then you can give me a plan!"

She hit it with everything she had.

The crossed scissors rested an inch above the Primordial Husk's fibrous surface, straining and sparking wildly. Crimson electricity lit suddenly across Ryuuko's form, and she gave a surprised yowl before shooting backwards, repelled.

Her back met something sturdy, softly firm; Satsuki grunted, arm hooking across Ryuuko's body as her heels slid several meters back. The elder sister steadied Ryuuko as her weight rested again on her feet; the younger woman's nose wrinkled, and she shook her head a few times, with a grimace.

"Are you alright?"

"Yeah-,"

A spot on the surface of the Primodial Husk whirled outward, suddenly sprouting a flower-like bulb that opened to fire a crackling beam of white light. Satsuki shoved aside, pulling Ryuuko with her to the ground. The blast struck the wall well behind them, bringing down a great deal of stone.

A second flower sprouted as they began to rise. As it grew bright with power, Ryuuko rose and leapt swiftly to the side.

Fired cleanly into her path, the blast struck her midair. She was thrown, spinning, harshly to the wall.

Staggering to the ground, Ryuuko lifted her arms to catch a dislodged, falling stone several times her size, bearing it on her shoulders as her knees bent with weight. Straightening with a yell, she hurled it upward in a web of Fibers extending from her fingertips, and slung it powerfully down toward the enemy.

Satsuki watched the boulder shatter on contact with the space just above the Primordial Husk's outer membrane. Scattering bits of stone pattered directly from its surface, on its other side.

Ryuuko lobbed another stone, and a laser intercepted it.

Satsuki's eyes grew.

The younger woman dashed forward, cut side to side - and into the path of another blast.

Or she would have, had not Satsuki cut across her path with an arm across her throat, catching her short and throwing her back.

"So, that plan ready yet?" Ryuuko asked, running with Satsuki as she got her feet under her again.

"As a matter of fact, yes," Satsuki said, smirking at the way Ryuuko's combative eyes lit up. Ryuuko eyed the Primordial Husk warily as they ran; Satsuki kept her eyes on the natural barrier of stone they

dashed for. They slid behind it, a moment before a blast rocked the other side.

"How d'you read it so well?" Ryuuko panted.

Satsuki shook her head. "Don't give me too much credit. It's reading *your* mind, not mine."

"Shit!" Ryuuko hissed, realizing the truth to the words. It couldn't seem to influence her actions or thoughts effectively, but enough of their connection remained for it to observe.

"Can you force it out? Or hide your thoughts from it?"

"It's stubborn. And I ain't got the kind of focus to fight and block it out at the same time…"

"That makes things more difficult…"

"And it's got some kind of shield."

"I saw. It isn't flawless, however. It strengthens a barrier at the point of contact of your attacks; if we assume it's not merely being frugal with its energy, it can only shield one area, leaving the rest of it at a given time more or less unguarded.

"So we hit it at once."

"Except that you're a sitting duck before it. You'd never get close enough. It can fire upon us approximately every six seconds, but with more power the longer it waits beyond that-,"

They huddled together as the wall shook at a blast to the other side. "At least it seems immobile…" she muttered.

"So," Ryuuko said, "my mind's just workin' against us now. So much for two brains bein' better at tackling problems than one…"

Satsuki considered her. "There *is* a way we might use this to our advantage…" She sighed. "I may have a plan. But if it's to work, I can't tell you what it is. And you'll need to trust me enough to do as I say without thinking, for a bit."

"Mindlessly following Lady Satsuki's orders, huh?" Ryuuko sneered. She brushed off her sister's apologetic look, laying a hand on her shoulder. "I trust ya', Sis. If it's your plan, it'll work out."

Satsuki nodded. "First- go!" she said, pointing.

Ryuuko lunged to spring into the open. Satsuki's kick to her ankle sent her crashing to the dirt beneath the path of a blast that rattled the cavern.

"Now get back here," Satsuki said, while Ryuuko scrambled back to her side. "Well done. That's bought us - or, this wall - some time," she explained, for her sister's skeptical almost-pout. "Give me the scissor blades now… no. Damn!"

"Sis?"

"I'll just take one."

"You'll need to cross-slash." It wasn't a question.

"Time is of the essence. Our only option is to see how well a single slash does. Even if you shrink one to a size I can hold in my teeth, I won't be able to guide you that way, much less swing it with enough power for it to be of use."

"Satsuki…" Ryuuko's hand on her shoulder shifted, brushing over the nub beneath the Life Fiber sling. She thought a moment, studying it closely. "Alright."

Their heads ducked as the wall shook. "'Alright'?" Satsuki echoed in question, meeting her eyes again.

"I can't do what Ragyou did for Nui… but this much should work," she said, bringing her hand to her own right shoulder.

"No!" Satsuki said, realizing her intent.

"You need to land the hit, right? And we need to make it count. Ya' won't do it the way you are now."

"But that's…"

"Kiryuuin Satsuki, at a loss for words?" Ryuuko smirked. "Will I still be able to do *my* part in the plan?"

A moment's hesitance, the flicker of a mental calculation, followed by a nod.

Ryuuko's reddening fingers straightened, forming smoothly into a spear. Her lip trembled once, but her eyes were calm. "Then how about lettin' *me* make a logical move, real quick."

SHLUGK!

Satsuki cringed at the sound of it, but did not turn away. She steeled herself, and accepted it; she only shut her eyes when bonding Life Fibers soon burned richly with her power, to automatically fuse flesh properly to flesh, heal, and settle again.

"There ya' go," Ryuuko said, still grinning shakily as her fresh wound sealed. "Looks good on you. It'll probably be a wicked scar, too," she said, stroking a hand across the line where the union had occurred. A visible mark had etched out the clear boundary of two slightly offset skin tones. "Though I'm shorter, so you'll be just a touch asymmetrical, length-wise. Sorry…"

"You fool," Satsuki murmured, twitching the fingers before clenching the hand. It answered her will, smoothly as if it were her own. She felt sly moisture come away as she dabbed quickly at her eyes -

tears that didn't show in the too-firm set of her jaw, didn't rattle her voice. "Don't apologize for being shorter."

When Ryuuko stepped into the open in a minute, with Satsuki's arm over her good shoulder, the Primordial Husk did not fire.

-"*You can clear the distance in moments, but in my current state, I can't reach it in under six seconds."*-

That was what Satsuki had said. *It doesn't know what hand we'll play… so if it also has one good shot, it'll preserve it until the last possible moment.*

As she eyed the stewing heap of Fibers, it gurgled and split - forming not a cannon, but the roughly cast semblance of a mouth.

"*You… are w-wret-ched creat-tures…"* The voice gurgled slowly out, a crude replication of human speech.

"An unsurprising opinion," Satsuki scoffed, "for one that would condescend that our lives are irrelevant beyond your benefit."

Its voice corrected, smoothing as it continued. *"You f-failure specimens… have doomed this p-planet to… prolonged suffering. V-violent and destructive beings. Flawed. Uncontrolled by us, you particularly are wildly out of balance, here. You would not stop at a business empire. Increase your numbers, and Kiryuuin alone may rapidly enslave and* destroy *this broken world."*

"We ain't doin' this to steal the throne," Ryuuko said. "We're stoppin' you because we're the ones that can."

"We *are* stronger than ordinary humans," Satsuki picked up. "Humans themselves are strong; you tweaked the algorithm of evolution to your benefit, and developed *homo sapiens* . But because we evolved unnaturally, you needed to make us resourceful enough to weather uncontrollable changes in the world around us." She raised her head. "The Kiryuuin's strong will is a byproduct of

your design - an effect that could not be erased, if all desired traits were to remain intact. The formidable power necessary to rule over an already necessarily inventive, sentient, and intelligent species - that is what you've placed in our hands, and what will now bring your undoing!"

"*You are WEAK before me… !"*

"Are we? It's true that Life Fibers would never *design* a host species to be capable of overthrowing them. But no matter how meticulous the intended design, *nature* breeds variation! It is of no import what manner of invincible god you fancy yourself - we've long since outgrown the shackles of our creator!"

"*Outgrown?!* " it snarled.

"Our power is your power, yeah?" Ryuuko shot back, catching onto Satsuki's train of thought. "And you're not just greedy - you're efficient. You'll let your cattle develop as much as possible before stagnating their accelerated evolution, and letting them populate a planet. But as long as we have the diversity you lack, a wild enough outlier - one unanticipated 'blip' bigger than you can reasonably account for - oughta' be enough to topple you.

"And your own carefully controlled shepherds are the only ones with a stray chance of coming close to posing that threat, aren't we?! We may not be monsters like Ragyou, wielding two incredible powers compounded in one body - but we sure as hell killed her, now didn't we?"

"The two of us are the glitch in your program," the elder sister proclaimed. "We are too much for you, together: a Life Fiber hybrid capable of absorbing, and utilizing, the honed powers of a wielder of the Kiryuuin arts." Satsuki's grip tightened on the scissor blades, which she held about their joined axle. "You didn't expect us. You can't use us. You don't know how to deal with us. And we **terrify** you. Does your fear brand us as vile? Do you find us repulsive, devilish? If so, then too bad - it's our game now. So welcome to HELL!"

A roar was its answer; a dozen skewers zipped toward them, across the room. Satsuki hopped onto Ryuuko's back, and the younger sister took off running, sprinting, toward the Primordial One's husk.

Numbers, in the end. Statistics. That's what we have to pray to, Satsuki thought, teeth clenched as she raised a scissor in either hand. *But let's find out, here and now, how large of a blip we can make.*

Twenty meters away - Ryuuko ducked amid her sprint, letting Satsuki dice the Life Fiber skewers as they met.

The preparing energy cannon glowed from the Primordial Husk's maw, terrifically bright.

"JUMP!" Satsuki cried, and Ryuuko ignored her own judgment and did, early though it seemed.

She would have gone considerably higher, had not Satsuki, in just the same moment, shifted and sprang with her good leg from Ryuuko's back. The long-haired woman sailed forward into the air above her, scissors in hand.

Ryuuko felt the Primordial One's shock along with her own - felt it withholding and re-orienting the cannon, from the calculated height of where Ryuuko's intended leap would have taken her. An instant of indecision, wavering as the sisters drew near. Ryuuko, powerful, far more mobile. Satsuki, dangerous as an energy source, holding the blades…

It selected its target.

Ryuuko's reaction, at seeing its aim angle upward for her airborne sister, was to throw her body into its path, mere meters before it, as it fired.

Satsuki had known she would.

Ryuuko yowled aloud as the searing blast split against a burning hand outstretched before her; the jet of energy deflected in a superheated spray only briefly before melting through, tearing off her thumb with a large chunk of her palm. It then punched unimpeded into her torso, scattering on impact before finally boring through her side.

But the rest of Ryuuko's tattered hand had unraveled into bloody threads, darting to sink into the Primordial Husk's amorphous exterior, and pull. Her eyes were viciously intent as she steered herself and clung as she met it, flattening herself to the cannon-mouth to take the continuing blast with the part of her abdomen still intact enough to do so.

She flung a scream through gore-streaked lips and rammed her forehead into her enemy's rippling hide, wrestling against it as it writhed in protest, in outrage, and fought to throw her. She burned her power, repairing continuously where it destroyed. Its core lit up as a bright spot shone from its heart, reacting, resonating with her power as it impulsively tore at her ki, using her own bioenergy to further sustain the blast. She couldn't heal fast enough - the damage was outpacing her, the shield was sparking up against her body and her digging feet to try to dislodge her. The beam was strengthening, carving into her, nearly piercing through. Horror clawed at her snarling resolve, as her vision began to go white.

And Satsuki dropped from above, running the scissors' blades, with the whole of her weight and her strength behind them, cleanly through yielding Fibers until a cross-slash split the Primordial Core.

Light permeated the nest of fibers - spreading from the clean 'X' pattern rent into its deflating form. The laser that had just begun to spray from a spreading point on Ryuuko's back sputtered out, died. The surface began to expand in places, to grow brittle and weak.

And with a dying yowl, the Primordial Husk exploded in a great blast of light, and a scattering, blackening body of disintegrating threads.

Satsuki's ears were ringing before she crashed painfully to the cavern floor a short distance away. She blinked in the dying light; she, Ryuuko, and the scissor blades had all been thrown in different directions by the blast.

"R-Ryuuko. Ryuuko… !" Satsuki rasped, pushing herself up. Having been almost directly above it, she had been thrown high; Ryuuko, from its side, had flown far. Satsuki stumbled and fell, and flailed on without pause, knees smearing through trailed splotches of blood as she crawled toward a figure splayed awkwardly a few dozen meters away. The ground grumbled, cracked in places; the damaged roof peppered the cavern with the crash of falling stones.

The younger woman wasn't breathing, when Satsuki dragged herself up at her side. The uniform she had recreated was draped in tatters about her form; her eyes were round and white, her features cast rigidly in a rictus of shock. A messy curtain of red hung down her chin. Her front was a mess of burn-riddled flesh, shreds of raw, dripping muscle, of torn innards and pooled blood, while her stomach and side gaped to the air.

The wounds weren't healing.

The Kiryuuin whimpered, knees dragging through spilt blood as she pulled herself over her sister, a palm meeting her cheek. She buried her face in short hair over Ryuuko's shoulder, as panic began to course through her. "Wake up, Ryuuko - wake up… !" Her voice was low, quiet. She realized the shaking breaths in the air now weren't hers alone. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, but you did great! You did perfectly! We beat it! Please, p-please, Ryuuko-,"

The younger woman's body had quaked as Satsuki's hand, once Ryuuko's hand, clapped lightly at her cheek. Breaths, fast and light, shallow and escalating hyperventilation; a chest quavering, heaving, above a savaged gut.

Her eyes were still white as her head snapped upward, burying a row of sharp canines and incisors strongly into muscle at the base of

Satsuki's neck.

The long-haired woman gasped. She felt an arm curl drunkenly around her, felt the prickle of Life Fibers drawing on her from every inch of their bodies in contact. She gave readily; she pressed herself closer, knitting her fingers into short hair to support Ryuuko's head, ensuring her clean access to her neck.

Ryuuko drank desperately - coughed, and drank more, carefully, for several seconds on end. Satsuki felt the mangled hand on her back, restored, rise to nestle delicate fingers into her hair, telling her it was alright. She felt the blood pooled on the ground shrink inward, recovered by its source. She gave one gentle moan, as she felt life breathe back into the revitalizing woman beneath her. A chest elevating smoothly with air against her. It was right. It was so right.

Ryuuko's jaws parted with a minute squelch, fangs sliding from flesh and lightly trailing blood. She breathed heavily a moment - and their embrace tightened again as their lips came immediately together, quick but firm, treasuring, thanking, loving, all at once for just a few precious moments. The girl's blue eyes were tender as they parted. Satsuki smiled above her, moisture shimmering in her eyes, and received a warm and lopsided grin in return.

"I love you," Ryuuko murmured, as a hand ran across her stomach and side. Satsuki's touch was checking regenerated flesh, scraping away charred patches above it and finding it whole. At the relief washing over her face, Ryuuko folded her remaining hand gratefully over the back of Satsuki's on Ryuuko's cheek; her shoulder had stopped bleeding, but had failed to generate a copy of the transplanted limb. But her grievous gouges and burns, her damaged organs, were well again. She folded her fingers between Satsuki's, nuzzling affectionately against her palm. "I love you… Your plan was perfect, Sis; it worked. It's alright. I love you…"

Satsuki smiled.

The earth shook, and a long crack in the stone floor nearby leaped several feet wide.

Ryuuko was immediately upright, her arm around Satsuki and Satsuki's arms around her, as Life Fibers rained as a sea of thick crimson-black over the collapsing edges of the cavern roof. Ryuuko swore as their surroundings shook. "No - no! We won, damn it!" But now that she was reading them again, her senses told her something appalling about the vicinity outside.

Fibers crashed down and surged from all sides, rolling and bounding fluidly for heart of the cavern, and the ground split, lurched and rocked askew in many a place. Ryuuko stood, hauling her sister up by an arm around her shoulders. "What're they doing?!" she cried, as their eyes swept over the hordes.

"A hive doesn't collapse when its queen suddenly dies," Satsuki said, voice steady against the shock. "It takes emergency action to survive! The clusters, the mutation of COVERS that appeared four years ago - they're independent to this extent, after all!"

"What can they do without the Primordial One coordinating them?!" Ryuuko found herself shouting over the noise, adrenaline storming at the languor in her veins. "Killing it shoulda' wrecked the plans it had, right?!"

"Maybe this is a less efficient backup - or maybe the Fibers are simply acting instinctively now. They won't execute a true Cocoon Sphere Genesis with the state of the planet as it now is, but they might frenzy to do what they were programmed to - to do all they can now, regardless! And they'll use us, and any more humans they can capture quickly, to trigger it!"

"All they can…" Ryuuko's teeth grit; she held tight to Satsuki, leaping to another plate of earth as their former one lurched. They stood at the edge of a crevice. The throngs would be upon them soon.

"We can't let them take my remaining power…" Satsuki glowered out at them, solemn. "Quickly, Ryuuko! You need to use-!"

"Hold onto me, tight!"

"What?" Satsuki said, but complied.

Ryuuko bent her knees, poised to jump. "I think I can fly, actually."

"What?!"

Rearing Fibers crashed down with a roar at the heart of the cavern.

Ryuuko and Satsuki shot straight into the sky above, rising above the cavern and into open air. Two sets of blue eyes grew round against the speeding wind as they beheld the landscape around them.

It looked at first as if a red sheet had been drawn over the earth. In the distance, off toward the expanding horizons, the fibrous sea parted around elevated obstacles and bodies of water, rushing from all directions toward Honnouji; nearer they were heavy, woven together thickly enough to flow over protuberances of obstacles underneath them, and stretching unhindered across even the bay. Beneath Ryuuko and Satsuki, Life Fibers spiraled endlessly up the mountain of Honnouji, forming a cone and filling the cavern they'd escaped. Heaping at the summit, they erupted suddenly upward in a crimson spire, drawing more Fibers after them like a sheet of putty pinched and drawn up.

"They're persistent!" Satsuki said, one arm over Ryuuko's shoulder and the other under the opposite side's arm, hand locked to wrist.

"They're angry at us," Ryuuko breathed - and she blinked, frowning as the two of them began to slow in their ascent. The Life Fibers climbed steadily after them.

Satsuki slowly raised a brow.

"I think… that was just my jump, actually," Ryuuko remarked, as they began to fall.

"Ryuuko!"

The younger woman drew a bit more power from her companion, by the contact of their skin; it was so rich now, even a miniscule bit sent Ryuuko's hair flaring up, streaked vibrantly with blue. But her feet kicked as they accelerated down, toward the inverted vortex of Life Fibers that raced to claim them.

"Ryuuko, stay calm and fly! Fly-!"

They lurched upward, wobbling for a moment as strange force plucked them from their descent; Ryuuko started to go head over heels, Satsuki dangling behind her. Then she straightened out, supporting her weight, and they bolted upward in a streak of gravity-defying fury.

"Shit - *shit!* " Ryuuko yelled, grinning against all odds. "We're doin' it, Sis! We're flying!"

"You're doing great!" Satsuki said. She didn't know what they planned to do next, but for now, they were soaring unrestrained, piercing the clouds, ears popping, hair lashing in the wind behind them.

They could see so far. And in the distance, as the spire of Fibers built itself higher on a mountain-like, narrowing cone, the jagged edges of a bloodlike crust of red were receding inward across the land, sucked toward Honshuu, toward Toukyou bay, toward Honnouji.

"All the world's Life Fibers," Ryuuko said. "They're one body now - one mind, one drive."

Satsuki discerned her meaning as they slowed, gradually coming to a hover. "If they're this intent on us, they're not actively seeking other

humans right now. Nowhere in the world. The rest of the planet, beyond what lies beneath us here… it's clean right now, isn't it?"

Ryuuko nodded slowly. "They're all here. All in view. Sis… Satsuki. It's time to quit running, isn't it?"

Satsuki studied the woman's downturned, contemplative eyes. She tightened her arms briefly across Ryuuko's torso; her younger sister brushed a tender hand's new, pink flesh over her arm in return. "It appears that way." She took a breath of the thin air, feeling, memorizing Ryuuko's warmth against her, in their moment of calm.

She looked at the Life Fiber entity again. If they fled, flew someplace safe, the Life Fibers would almost certainly spread out again. "Can you destroy something so massive?"

The corner of Ryuuko's mouth quirked up meekly. "However I look at it, it's probably impossible."

"But the time has come for me to go, hasn't it?" She was silent a moment. But when she spoke, it was with a tone calmly stern. "Take my power - all of it. You said the last piece to go is always the core of the soul, right? The component that makes someone human. And that small component's power dwarfs the remainder. Absorb mine, and see what you can do." Her hand tightened on Ryuuko's. "I'm ready. I trust you. Just do what you can."

Ryuuko laughed - a small, short wisp of sound. Her head fell; then it rose, and her eyes took in the curved expanse of the planet below, blue waters, barren land, snow-capped contours, rough deserts and green wilds. The edges of the sky, melding into a gradient of splendorous tones; the glimmering stars in the darkness above. So much they could see, though so little was truly within their view.

Her voice was bitter, croaking stubbornly against the onset of tears. "I can fly freely through the sky. I can survive getting my guts blown to pieces. Can I not save one person?"

"Those feats were with my power, Ryuuko," Satsuki reminded her, gently. "A product of human evolution. And by using that power, you can save so many more."

The Fibers broke the clouds below, like a spear. Ryuuko remained thoughtful as she spoke again.

"Evolution, huh… 'Advancing' and 'changing.'"

[EVOLUTION]

"But switch out 'advance' for 'god,' and you get a different sort of *'shinka,'* don't you?"

[APOTHEOSIS]

"I said there are no gods in a world like this one… and maybe I was right. Here we are, facin' down the end of the world, and no matter how bad I might want one to fix things… there's nothing but us, and what we can change with our own hands."

Her hand left its perch on Satsuki's arm, stretching downward as they continued to float.

"Ryuuko…?"

"I'm gonna do something reckless, real quick."

Her hand reddened and unraveled to the elbow, sending skewers of thread arcing downward, twirling into one, and colliding with the grand, ascending spire of Life Fibers a hundred meters below.

The air sparked and reacted about the point of contact, and energy shattered outward in a wave, a halo of perturbation. Far below, the cloud cover scattered out in a disc; at the sisters' height, where the air had been calm and thin, their hair was tossed by suddenly tempestuous wind. Ryuuko's head jerked back, her neck tense but eyes still intent on the monolith of Fibers below.

"M-my mind - they still recognize my mind-," She gasped in surprise as reddened veins surfaced, lighting quickly across her skin. "They're attacking-!"

"Let me in!" Satsuki cried - and her power ran, with the most tremendous flux she'd ever experienced, from her body.

But Ryuuko kept the channel open, as she fought - rather than returning attack, or trying to grasp control of them, she fought to pacify. She expended power almost straight from Satsuki's body, the second it reacted with the Life Fibers in her own. And as their hearts grew close, their existences grew close, Satsuki felt everything - felt Ryuuko's fear, her pain, her determination, and the will of all the world's Life Fibers clawing, beating, pounding furiously against it.

Ryuuko is… enduring this…?!

"A l-little more!" Ryuuko growled, skin burning, splitting, healing again as warring energies roiled through her.

Satsuki's teeth ground, as more and more energy burned away. *You stop hurting her!!*

Her perception shifted - *and she flung up her hands in a sea of white, palms catching on an indistinct boundary as it crashed forward, a wall of darkness, chaotic and fierce. Her feet scraped backwards in the shrinking world of white she stood in; she lowered her stance, caught traction, and slowed the barrier's advance with a roar of vigor, of fighting spirit that became raw strength. She didn't know where she was, but she couldn't let this foulness overtake-*

"Ryuuko-chan!" a voice squealed at her side. Mankanshoku was leaning against the wall, face scrunched in effort, palms and cheek pressed up against it as she strained to hold it back. Her feet slipped and stepped rapidly again. "You won't hurt her! Ryuuko-chan is Ryuuko-chan, and I'm not letting you change that! When someone becomes a part of you, they're more than just power or energy! Their hearts don't go away, either!"

The wall lurched defiantly against them; Mako's back struck into the front of another ethereal figure, a wiry form, who pressed palms to the wall beside hers and wrestled against it, teeth gritted in thrilled terror beneath furious eyes. "Lady Ryuuko's experiences as a human let her recognize herself as distinct from you!" Yoriyoshi ground out, glasses crackling and scattering free as the wall inched on, slowed. "Our minds became one with hers, so we know! If you can't respect the value of that, the likes of you will never overcome her!"

Diversity, Satsuki thought, bracing her hands against the wall with them. It mapped Ryuuko's mind before, when she still fought to close herself off from everyone and run from her deeds. But it was being rebuffed by individuality - that of the souls she'd absorbed!

"It looks like even my existence could manifest here," a deep voice remarked. Satsuki registered the dark blue of what she was wearing, as the uniform's eye angled combatively toward the wall. "Once before, we tried to protect Ryuuko together, didn't we?"

"How…?" Satsuki wondered. But the light had nearly been devoured; little more remained at their backs. They had halted the advance, but wouldn't be able to hold it off for long this way.

Even as she thought it, one more sleek hand, with manicured nails, rested on the shuddering wall outside Satsuki's and higher up - from someone poised calm and straight, shoulders back. The sultry voice that lilted out was almost indifferent, though a telltale, dangerous glint of amusement shone in its owner's raptly focused eyes.

"*The* gall*!" Ragyou scoffed, chin high. Her voice became low and firm. "My girls have surpassed you. You have no right to them any longer."*

The darkness warped and shattered, bursting away as light flooded out across the space.

Ryuuko's head was upturned beside hers, eyes stained red and black. Then her gaping jaw sealed, and she shut her eyes and dropped her chin as vibrant blue returned, cool and resolute. The writhing Fibers of her arm stilled - and a wave of stillness followed, rolling down through the whorling, conical mass below, freezing as it went.

Satsuki blinked, feeling Ryuuko's body against hers, supporting her, physical and distinct. She was alive. Ryuuko had drawn enough power to shift her awareness, but sent her back again.

"That was close," Ryuuko said, panting softly.

"Why did you risk it?" Satsuki asked, though she found, perhaps as an effect of mingling consciousness with her, that she already understood to an extent.

"I wanted to check something, but I needed it to calm down before I did…" She looked toward the now placid Life Fiber entity that rested in the air below, still stretching to the earth. When she spoke again, she called out with her voice as well as her mind, through the bridge of flesh to Life Fiber that still held between them.

"I see now," she said. "And judgin' by your confusion, you see it too, don't you? The thing you most long for is the thing you lack… something that you can't seize on your own, but needs to be given. The power to *understand* us.

"For all your efficiency, you still showed what seemed like plain old fascination toward us. You observed the birth of a religion connected to you; you obsessed with it, as if people who revered and praised

you could help you attain what you thirsted for. And you chatted up my mind, just to see my thoughts evolve during reasoning and discussion. You watched so closely; you mimicked human behavior, even presented yourself in my form. Now you've seen me at my lowest, and at my highest; you've mapped my memories and active mind, and seen me shaped by the people around me."

The Entity hung on her words, perplexed. It was in no way physically hindered, but seized by an impasse in decision-making, unable to act for the pull of curiosity. It knew it was on the verge of something significant; it stirred subtly, a mass of collective conscience, electrical signals bound up in a body of innervated thread. Satsuki listened silently; Ryuuko's voice was level.

"With me as a conduit, connected as much to Life Fibers as humanity, you sought to comprehend us. But no matter how much we interacted, how much you expressed yourself in human terms, or how thoroughly you mapped and scrutinized, even toyed with my brain, you couldn't do more than comprehend. Meanwhile Senketsu, a pure Life Fiber kamui, developed a soul before all this even began. So why couldn't you?"

The Entity stirred, as if anxious.

Ryuuko smirked. "After all this time, and all the things you've given us over the course of millennia, here I've given the Creator something back. The thing that makes me human, makes any of us 'human.' *Empathy* .

"Empathy… and the gift of recognizing yourself in another being's heart. You want to cover the universe, you said. So you create host species that feel things you can't feel, have souls with parts you can't even get any benefit from, just to eradicate them for your own perpetuation, every time. It didn't add up. To your ends, the soul is something extraneous - maybe an artifact or byproduct of your design, maybe more. But without having any capacity for it of your own, our souls really are just meaningless electricity to you."

Something like distress reached her through the link. Her heart beckoned. "Come on. I want to know more about you. If you're willing, then-,"

She gasped as the Entity poured suddenly upward, Fibers beginning to rush rapidly into her hand, then swarming over her entire arm. She didn't fight this time, but drew them in, absorbing at a mindboggling rate.

"No!" Satsuki cried, watching them blur and snap into Ryuuko's suspended form. The great mountain of them was very slowly thinning out, below.

"It's fine. This is what you wanted to feel, isn't it? You want to be needed, acknowledged. You want to evolve. The Life Fibers in my body have already become infused with me; it's why they don't fight my will. So it's not impossible for all of you to feel it, either!"

They roared and roiled in her soul, infecting her brain; she found that their urge to assimilate was not robotic, but an instinct ingrained in the shape of curiosity. Not pleasure, not physical hunger. *Curiosity* . And that curiosity had found her offer one they virtually couldn't resist.

Her eyes grew as their nature truly dawned on her. They had been born unevolving and uniform, and the mechanism by which they were driven to operate, to feed, reproduce, and propagate themselves, was a thirst that was never meant to be satisfied.

You envy our souls.

Because you breed us to bear souls that magnetize you to them.

And you cover and fuse with us… to become closer. To try to learn about us.

But you never do.

You're biologically incapable of it, and you don't evolve.

So all you can do is keep trying.

She grimaced.

If you have one…

How cruel is your 'creator'?

Despair billowed violently in her skull, with new emotions, with surging outrage at the injustice, with bafflement, with anguish. It was as if the Life Fibers rifled through emotions, searching for the ones they could make their own, could apply, could experience anew, and lost themselves in a whirlwind of them, a chain reaction of flailing realizations and expanding consciousness - comprehension blossoming and yielding fruit as quickly as their physical form could vanish into the mad human's flesh. She gave the Entity her mind, her machinery for the running, and let it learn so rapidly, clumsily, tumultuously to feel.

"You want my mind?" she shouted over the wind, bellowing to keep her head in some semblance of order, to keep some sliver of identity intact enough to work her lips and confirm her thoughts were still extricable from the tangle in her head. "Go ahead - feel it. Know it. Soak yourselves in every last drop of it!"

She thrust her experiences to the forefront - as much to open them to the Entity as to hold onto her self. She fought to keep them cohesive, to not let them be damaged or skewed.

"And learn it firsthand - why I love this world!!"

Why *did* she protect it? But the good, the bad, the pleasure, the agony, confidence and helplessness - while she drew breath, she wouldn't stand for them making a mess of any of her experiences, she realized. Life was precious, however painful it could be.

"Know the different people I met, as I knew them!"

Batshit insane, half of them.

"Feel the meaning in suffering, as I did!"

So much of it, the Life Fibers themselves had given her. But she did not resent.

"I'm tiny, to you - one, tiny human with one tiny brain. My physical existence is fragile, brief and constrained. But my heart is the heart of many! My experience was a human experience, and it can't ever be separated from me! My body is finite, but my love is boundless! I am the flow! I am one with the light that courses through the soul of all humanity!"

So much desolation, she had caused. She was interwoven with it all - with every human that had ever been devoured by Life Fibers, and every soul she had caused to be lost to them in the catastrophe four years ago - sequences of once-indecipherable data, their true meaning worthless to their predators. But to her they were millions, billions of lifetimes.

Places, bonds, memories-

Struggles, triumphs, wars-

Sciences, technologies-

Religions, cultures, societies-

Languages, histories-

Instantly grasped and comprehended. She was awash with the old, the young, the rich, the poor, the educated, the skilled, the outcast, the misfortunate - generations of experiences, of hopes, of dreams, of contemplations, of knowledge. They were life itself, flashing and registering through her consciousness in a crisp, ephemeral blur -

the processing power of the enormity of Life Fibers, coordinated by one human brain.

So many had suffered so much. But she didn't buckle in despair, didn't turn away. They had every right to be known.

She didn't know whether she spoke aloud any longer, as the Fibers sizzled into her steaming flesh, as her body struggled to adapt to the flux, the raw power of it all, and a level of saturation that only grew exponentially more nonsensical.

'*Because I've lived as a human, I can appreciate this in its entirety. It's not just electricity, to me… It's life. And life is p-precious! No matter how painful it may be! It's beautiful, in all its joy and sorrow!*'

She and the Entity were infecting each other with themselves in earnest, as they fused. A roar resounded through every fiber of her existence as the Life Fibers channeled into her, staggering, mind-boggling, utterly insatiable for the things they could experience through her as she bared herself to it. She would be completely vulnerable, they knew.

She was small, and they were absolute. No number of experiences could logically overpower their will.

Arrogance, they learned in one instant, one emotion on a vast intersection of axes and spectra, one discovery amid the endless ricochet through them. This was the one human languages had named *arrogance занóсчивость Überheblichkeit* **יהירות** *arroganza αλαζονεία-*

But it was only one instantaneous reflection, before its frenetic conscience spiraled off in a new direction again.

Respect - this human female was brave, if foolish. But more powerful than should have been possible.

Bewilderment - why was she doing this? She would annihilate herself. But she'd given them so much-

Awe. The entire occurrence taking place - the things they felt, the things they so rapidly ingested and built up in themselves - her empathy for them, her mind welcoming them-

Why-

Fear.

Why. How would she benefit?

Fear

Why-

Want to- understand

The search for the answer, consuming, ordering the chaos.

Fear.

More, need more, then surely-

Fear.

The single computation consumed their entirety, reached its limit - caught short, sparking wheels spinning freely in place.

Fear.

They were never meant to know more.

CcAnNoTtCoMPuUtTE-

Ryuuko gave a long, hoarse cry as the last of the Entity vanished into her, leaving her human hand outstretched in the air.

Satsuki felt a rigid body, that had spent so many seconds seizing and tense, relax slightly. Ryuuko lilted a few feet downward before catching their weight with flight again.

"Ryuuko, are y-you… What's happened?" she managed, trying to make sense of the fact that Ryuuko had just absorbed, presumably, all the world's Life Fibers. Her skin was patterned with red markings; her hair was a glorious blaze of crimson and gold. Her power, nameless, boundless, energized the air around them. "What exactly have you done…?"

She trailed off, as moisture fell from her sister's chin.

Ryuuko was smiling. *"They finally crossed the threshold. They understand… !"* Her accent had shifted - unfamiliar, without feeling unfamiliar. It was an average of countless voices and inflections; it was unquestionably human, touched by her emotion but wise and comforting. Yet for the somehow unnatural uniformity, it was almost alien.

She grasped at her heart, wheezing through her fanged grin. Her body curled inward, as if with pain.

"*They're so happy… and so sad, and so many other things. I know… I know,"* she crooned. *"It's confusing, isn't it?"*

"Ryuuko, please tell me if you're alright…"

"*I am… S-sis… Now, it's time."* She laughed, the sound echoing around them. *"You unlocked the power to bend destiny to your will. If I could borrow that for a second…"*

"I'm ready…" Satsuki gave her shoulder a squeeze. "I've always been ready, and you know that. Do what you need to do, Ryuuko."

The younger woman shifted; Satsuki found, as she'd suspected, that gravity did not claim her when she left Ryuuko's back. They faced each other, Satsuki's two hands clasping Ryuuko's one between

them. She realized absently how disheveled she was, how weak her body, whereas her sister glowed with health. Ryuuko's bare skin was smooth and unmarred, her lithe frame lined with comfortable strength. A faint aura of flame seemed to cling to her skin, bright but not burning. A face once easily inclined to childish expressions was almost too serene, and the glittering, vividly blue eyes that took Satsuki in basked in warm enlightenment, in untold wisdom.

"You're beautiful," Satsuki said.

Ryuuko folded her arm around her. Satsuki's arms encircled her waist; their eyes shut, foreheads resting together with the embrace.

"*Ready?"*

"Ready."

Their souls met, and in a blink, an instant, Life Fibers expanded like a mist into the air around them.

It was warm now; it was bright. There was no describing how far the altered space stretched around them, patterned with a tranquil fog of soft crimson. Ryuuko's mind was in harmony with it all - with the expelled Life Fibers extending from her, still inextricably bound; with the immense energy that suffused it all; with Satsuki's vibrant soul, that recalled her individuality.

"*The moment they were able to destroy me,"* Ryuuko said, *"they were stunned to inaction. They've gained a soul with which to evaluate us…"*

Her voice was hers again, and it was everywhere - a thrum of air in her throat, and a resonance in the strange, balmy and luminous space. Satsuki marveled that everything felt so right, so safe. In her arms, Ryuuko felt the same.

"*They saw the whole of humanity through human eyes. They felt all the wonderful and terrible things we've done, all that we're capable*

of. And in the end, it came out to this. They couldn't bear to destroy us; they've judged us worthy of living on. The Creator has found life on this planet to be meaningful, in and of itself.

"*They understand now, after all this time. I could never force them to bend to my will, but they sympathize of their own accord. They see now why someone could even love this world enough to* disappear *for it. You who wanted only to perpetuate yourself for all time - even you can understand such a sentiment now, can't you?"*

The space stirred, attentive and docile. Satsuki felt the draw on her energy increase; her soul was so gently, so lovingly being stripped fatally bare.

And another, dimmer, familiar soul was trickling back. Never once beheld in such an impossibly intimate manner, but distinct all the same.

Realization jarred her. "Ryuuko?!"

"*You got me,"* she said, head resting on Satsuki's shoulder. *"My energy's pretty damned unremarkable next to yours; I never was any good at that Kiryuuin energybending nonsense, after all. But, here. I'll trade ya', Sis…"*

And the last, most precious bit of Satsuki's own power snapped free, into Ryuuko's body and at once into the space all around them. The exchange was complete. Power blazed from Ryuuko's form; Satsuki watched intently as a wash of white light filled their senses.

-"*Scattered though they are, all Life Fibers in the world desire this of you. They are like children. They need guidance, and beseech of you to protect and nurture them."-*

Ryuuko raised her head, and her hand drifted up, fingers spread, palm skyward and feet hanging shoulder width apart as they floated up and back through space - space that responded to her, shifted

around her, twisted to clothe her and trailed in her wake. Her eyes were soft upon the Earth far below.

She had interwoven, drawn the flow of, and bound her body to all the world's Life Fibers. She held in the heart of her being, in the place of her own soul, the power of the strongest human to ever live. Kiryuuin Satsuki. Her sister.

Only one thing remained to be done.

"*Hissatsu…"*

[CERTAIN KILL]

Her hand snapped shut. There was a whistling shriek of activating power, as it surged up like a wave approaching its crest. Then the boom of her lungs, the thunderous crack of the invocation on her lips, was unleashed with sure finality.

"MOKUSHI DANZETSU!"

[APOCALYPSE BREAKER]

A roar.

The sea of white faded, vanished - and exploded again, bleaching the Life Fibers themselves in a wave originating from Ryuuko's body. For a moment two human forms were suspended at the heart of it all, in a space saturated by a spectacular glow.

Then Ryuuko's eyes tipped back, and the sisters began to fall.

The lustrous streams of Life Fibers moved with her. But they began to deteriorate, starting to vaporize most rapidly further out, and creeping in. The space around them was quickly thick with streaming, diffusing and vanishing droplets of light, as the sisters plummeted.

Satsuki held tightly to the smaller woman, teeth clenched. "Ryuuko!"

Her arm folded over her back. Parted lips twitched. "Sis…" Her eyes opened halfway, focused. Blue, once more; her appearance had reverted to normal. But she was so, so weak. "I-I've got you, Sis."

Ryuuko turned to keep herself beneath Satsuki; her back broke through the strikes of fierce, almost burning wind. She held her sister intently close, as they hurtled together for a rapidly approaching earth.

The white light of the dying Life Fibers had receded; the last of it was burning away, as bits of it trailed around Ryuuko's shoulders and back.

She grunted in effort, and the scraps of light became ordered, stretching out from her to either side. The shaping projections strained at the battering air, slowing their descent considerably. Not enough. Ryuuko felt Satsuki's arms holding strongly around her, and turned so that her back rather than Satsuki's stayed to the sky. Wings of light snapped to shape, grand and clearly defined. They caught the air again, dragging to what felt like a halt, and were promptly distorted and torn, shredded by the force required to slow them, before vanishing in still more scattering light.

Ryuuko was supporting Satsuki, holding her almost too tightly in the paltry strength of her arms, by the time her feet hit the ground two meters below.

Satsuki coughed against the bit of dust they'd stirred up. Ryuuko had twisted as she collapsed, and now lay at Satsuki's side. The older sister only now registered how quickly her heart raced, as she

pushed herself from the dirt, but the landing had been light. They were in the crushed wreckage of the stone-strewn cavern, the place now bare and still. Sunlight seared at the edges of calm, grey-white clouds above; a beam fell through a large circle where the heavens had been pierced.

She shook her head to clear it. "R-Ryuuko…?"

"I'm here, Sis. Only busted *one* knee, to boot."

A breath of relief. "You ch…"

When she got a good look at the younger woman, her words simply stopped.

Ryuuko's skin was translucent, ashen, and weak enough to bruise to the touch; darkened veins showed faintly beneath it. Her muscles were soft, quivering beneath loosened skin. Her arms and the stark outlines of her ribs were splotched dark at her front, purplish where Satsuki's weight had pressed into them; her broken knee was similarly discolored. Where her skin had by chance broken like tissue paper with the abrasions, blood dribbled lazily, barely fell. Her body shivered, and her breaths were shallow and slow, as if drawing air itself exacted toll after toll on her.

Above a lopsided smile, above pallid cheeks and hooded eyes, her hair's distinctive streak of color was brilliantly red. It flickered with unsteady pinpricks of light, like quartz in the sun.

Satsuki's younger sister, strong, brazen and loud. Soft-hearted, sincere.

For so long, indestructible.

Satsuki's breath shook. The word that ground from her throat was almost too forceful. "*No*…"

"It's alright. I had to hit all the Life Fibers, including my own - that's all."

"Ryuuko, that's *not* alright!" Shivering hands reached out - paused before they met her - and then pulled her carefully, so carefully into her lap, one arm folding under Ryuuko's, the other supporting her head. She felt so fragile. It was *wrong*, it wasn't alright at all. "Hurry - take some of my power and heal, o-or you'll-!"

"I can't leech your power anymore, Sis… You know that, right? It was the Life Fibers in me that let me do that, and they're just about gone. My body was never meant to be separated from them, y'know? Besides, I already used up all your power; it was awesome, all right. I'd hardly make any miracles happen by sucking my own ki back from ya'. It was tricky enough puttin' it there to begin with… Does it feel alright? It's stable, stayin' where it should…?"

Water fell on her forehead. Brow wrinkling, she shushed softly, as Satsuki's eyes ran with tears.

"It's fine, Sis. I paid off as much of the debt as I could, yeah? And it's fine, b-because I was able to know you, live with you… be *loved* by you. You've already saved me more times than you know."

"Then why should it end now?!" The words, so illogical. Her voice was high, quick. "It doesn't have to stop here! We're supposed to see the world change!"

Ryuuko chuckled, the sound like air through moist gravel. "We met so many people, didn't we? Each one their own brand of insane… but they showed a monster like me what was worth fightin' for. We fought for it… and the crazy part is, we actually *won*, Sis. So I'm fine with this."

"Ryuuko…" Satsuki was leaning close to her, to listen. A feeble hand dragged itself upward, trembling with effort, to cup Satsuki's cheek.

"After we've broken free of fate's thread, what then…? I don't know… but I'll be there with you… I'll always be with you. So when you find out… when w-we find out… won't that be something?"

She was sporting a placid grin, as she said it. Her eyelids fluttered and drooped. Her voice, her breath, were growing so faint.

Satsuki shook her head suddenly, face drawing tight with pain. "Ryuuko, no! RYUUKO!!"

"Thanks for always puttin' up with me… Sis."

"Ryuuko!" She gripped her shoulder, unblinking, struggling to take in as much of her as she could through a blur of hot tears. "I've still got a lot of things to chew you out for - and a lot of things to apologize for, and-!"

A sharp wheeze - a tensing form, an inclining chin, two widening eyes.

The gleaming red streak brightened, and sparklets of light at once departed from it, scattered away. Only dark blue remained as her head dropped again, and her hand thudded to the floor.

And she was limp.

A short, harsh intake of breath jumped through Satsuki's throat, and hung there, suffocating. She blinked, as if in confusion. But she felt the cold weight in her arms and lap; she felt the sun on her back. She lowered her head, silent.

Her teeth clenched, and she drew a knife easily from her belt.

We accomplished more than we had dared to dream, after all. We filled a purpose. So, surely…

This is alright, too… isn't it, Ryuuko?

For years, she had told herself she would follow her sister. There would come no better time than now for the Kiryuuin line to vanish.

She smiled peaceably in the ray of soft sun, taking one last look as she held the steel to her throat.

Her arm gave a twinge, and was rigid.

'*I fucking* swear*,'* a distant voice seemed to echo at her ears. *'Is that anything to be doing with the arm I gave you?'*

Satsuki's eyes narrowed stonily; the air in front of her seemed to shimmer oddly in the shifting light. She cringed, speaking slowly, emphatic. "I won't leave you alone."

'*I've* never *been alone. Before we even met, you were always thinking of me. And now you'll remember me. That's plenty, Sis. That means more than you could imagine…'*

Her hand shook. She felt as if warmth had enfolded it, invisible and steadying. She lowered the blade.

'*You fought so hard for so long, without ever worrying about yourself. It might not make sense, at first, but listen. You're free now. Start a new legacy in the Kiryuuin, or just live out what life you can.'* It was growing fainter. *'That part's up to you. But at least one of us better live to be old and gray, and frankly, it ain't gonna be me. So, please…'*

She felt another warmth, and pressed her hand to her chest above it.

'*Let me see the world change, from right here.'*

… *You child,* Satsuki thought. The knife clattered to the ground. "I'll never forget you, you hear?" She made her voice strong again. "Never."

She reached down. This arm - just shorter than the other. This hand, with callouses not her own.

"Matoi Ryuuko… my sister."

This breath in her lungs. The steady thump of her heart. The ki, the vitality, that most precious piece of the soul that had replaced her own, so she could live on.

"Were you here? Were you different?"

Her hand lowered gently, and brushed down the lids over dull blue eyes.

'*I was here… I was different. I saved the world with you.'*

Satsuki's shoulders shook. "That you did."

With that, her sister was truly gone.

Satsuki remained a long time unmoving in the silence.

It shouldn't have been this way. It had to be this way.

She rose eventually, stiffly, and turned her face blankly to the sunlit sky.

It hurt. Frightfully so.

It would surely hurt less, someday.

But even as the world's people crept from their shelters, and awoke to an era just a bit brighter, that day would not be today.

I will love you forever.

-Here, with You-

End

END OF PART III

End chapter song: "Till I Die"

A moment to share your thoughts on the chapter is always appreciated. Epilogue to follow.

Epilogue

Chapter 29: Epilogue

"Those who glimpsed it firsthand - saw our light, they say, like a star in the sky - were filled with the sense that someone strong is fighting for them. And it inspired them to fight for themselves." Life goes on, but in many hearts, a new god has been born: the god of those who've lost their way, and the god of those who find it.

Here we are Q.Q

First, announcements. Four story art requests have been made, and I should be getting to them in free time in the next couple of weeks. Thanks for your requests! I'll post them as I complete them on my art sideblog and my deviantART, and will probably go back and insert them into their places in the story as well.

Now, sentimental gunk.

It's been a long road, and this story turned into a larger project than I would have predicted when that experimental angst/fluff one-shot (which was later tweaked into chapter 1 of this 'reboot') sprung from my head years ago, a little after episode 22 of Kill la Kill aired. I think it was about a year after that when, of all things, hearing the Fallout Boy song "The Phoenix" for the first time suddenly gave me a burst of inspiration to build on the story 'a little more,' and somehow this adventure eventually came sprawling out. It's been a lot of work, but worth it, and I'm happy to be completing this humble contribution to the Kill la Kill fandom. This amazing anime has my thanks for being so inspiring, and for letting me meet a lot of friends I wouldn't have encountered otherwise.

Thanks go out to every reader, to every kudos-leaver, to every commenter. Thanks to the ones who've been here from the start, and the ones who joined us further in. Thanks to my partner I'm unbelievably grateful to have found so early in my life, and who's also been eagerly awaiting the story's conclusion (no spoilers for her!). And, finally, thanks to my honorary 'senpai' and the rest of a certain bunch of precious dorks who call me 'Ku' <3

Congrats for making it this far, and I hope you've enjoyed the ride! Whether you loved or hated how it turned out in the end, whether you're reading this on the release date or passing by here well after, please feel free to leave a comment to share your thoughts, feelings, or questions on anything about the story or conclusion. It doesn't need to be paragraphs; even a 'good job' means something, if that's what you've got time for. But any amount of feedback is welcome and greatly appreciated :)

I'll refrain from babbling any more in the end notes. 'Til next time,

-Kurouga

[img: http://orig15.deviantart.net/1926/f/2016/194/7/4/ateodlogoep_by_hinata0321-da9tlp3.png]

Epilogue \

The crack of gunfire rattled briny air, piercing the patter of grey dawn rain. A man crouched with his back to a group of barrels, breathing fast; a hunting bow shook in his hand. The sheathe of the simple katana at his hip dragged at the grassy soil, the blade useless at this range. The assailants no doubt knew the people of this settlement had many among them trained with the sword, but lacked firearms. The fact had long made a target of villages prosperous with rice paddies, fields, and coastal fishing, and it was amid preparations for the year-end festival and feast that the miscreants had launched

their attack. Only a handful with firearms, but a fair number lying in wait, not intent on racking up casualties with the squabble.

He looked to his own fellows, similarly crouched behind cover, behind buildings and crates, as more shots whizzed overhead. A simple radio crackled from his belt, emitted a buzz of static and words-

"*Boss, Hoshina's been hit-,"*

-and crackled out again. The man growled, steadied his breath, and drew an arrow from the quiver.

He let fly the moment he ducked upward and sighted a mark, firing true across the field despite the wind and rain. But his target, anticipating, twisted aside, and another's bullet clipped the leader's arm as he ducked away again. A spray of angry rounds shook the barrel at his back as he gasped, face dripping with rain and sweat.

They were getting frustrated. "You can't win!" a rogue shouted. "Fork over what we want, and we'll take mercy on your people!"

He shut his eyes, teeth clenched. The year's end… A shaking hand clasped the clay pendant that hung from his neck, rough fingers tracing the rain-moistened, familiar surface of a four-pointed star. The rage in him abated.

Years ago, the day after tomorrow. He'd been a child at the time, just a toddler at the start of the Dark Years, but he remembered the day well; his broken family had watched from a makeshift shelter as it unfolded in the distance. The thread monsters - the Life Fibers, gathering and sweeping toward the heavens, reined in and vanishing. A light in the sky, like a star.

At the thought he felt his despair calm as well, as it had then. However hard they'd all worked in this settlement, fending off one attack wasn't worth their lives.

He sent a message over the comm set, and pitched his bow into the open. A few bullets struck it, and the noise of gunfire ceased as it clattered to the earth. His hands, palms empty, rose above the barrels before he stood. The pendant's presence on his chest, just heavy enough to feel, was a comfort; he kept his thoughts on that, steadying himself as he locked eyes with several of the bandits.

"We'll hear your terms."

The one who seemed to be in charge grinned - and cocked a rifle his way. "You're the boss, right?"

His eyes grew slightly. But with bravery that he was proud to find was his own, he began to nod.

It was about then that the rhythmic, powerful chop of helicopter blades became discernible, then booming, over the falling rain.

A large shadow lurched across the field. As the dark, metal form swung by overhead, a human figure parted from its side with a leap, and plunged to the earth.

The new arrival took without flinching a drop that could have been fatal, ducking neatly into a roll and rising again, five meters before the bandit leader. The moment she reached full height a gusting clap of wind sent dark bangs and long, bound hair dancing, a black robe flaring at her back over simple jeans and a white shirt. The woman held herself with a self-assured measure of pride, the picture of health and suave strength, imposing even for her almost casual stance. Her hand rested on her hip, chin up as a stern look lashed into the shocked bandit. Distinctively strong eyebrows completed a formidable visage, the angle of them casting in steel a face whose cool beauty had been accentuated by the maturity of middle age.

The rogue screeched, and a throwing knife sank impossibly into the steel of his gun's barrel in the time it took his finger to twitch in. With a crack, a burst of smoke jumped from the weapon.

The woman's outstretched hand sank to a katana sheathed at her hip. The thug stepped hastily backward as she closed in quick, no-nonsense strides on well-worn boots. The shape of her hand on the hilt blurred, and the better part of the gun slipped in three clean pieces to the ground, meeting a puddle with a muddy plop.

Violently shaking hands dropped the remaining two hunks of steel she'd cut around, and the man toppled onto his backside, head shaking left and right as quickly as his neck would carry it.

A glower stabbed into the other hooligans nearby, severe. The remaining guns dropped in near-unison from faltering sets of hands.

"I'm sorry!" the man before her squeaked, scrambling to bow, to pin his forehead to the muck.

A firm eyebrow quirked as she studied him. "Do you know who I am?"

He nodded rapidly now, voice lost in his panic. His pale face was stark with fear, and more surprisingly, shame.

The woman took an exasperated breath. "Then I presume you understand how easily I could reduce you to a bloody heap on the ground?"

He whimpered.

"Do you have anything to say in defense of your actions?"

A shake of the head.

"*Speak.* "

"No, m-ma'am."

"Then correct me should I find myself mistaken. Resources are abundant, human life is scarce, safe havens and strongholds welcome refugees - and a band of able-bodied ruffians fancies the

thought of running wild in the roughlands, pillaging the fruits of others' labor in favor of committing to honest work?"

"It s-sounds fairly bad that way, doesn't it?"

Her tone was edged with ice, scathingly cold. "You would tread on the peace of humans living unthreatened. You suppose that with a bit of power in your hands, you can seize whatever you like out here. Are you having fun? Do you think this is a game?"

By the mortification in his eyes, he presently harbored no such belief.

"You wouldn't care to see *me* enter this game, would you? The game in which the strong or the better-armed crush the helpless?"

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry…"

She turned her head as he began to sob. "Were any of your settlement killed in this attack?"

The young leader shook his head, awed. Damned if she could get people to speak.

Her gaze returned to the groveling bandit. "I will be lenient if you and your fellows allow the people here to detain you. I shall confirm your sentence will be fair for your crimes. You will accept whatever work they assign you as you serve it. When you are released, you will settle here if they will have you, or you will take your leave peacefully. Am I clear?"

"Yes!"

"Swell. Cool your head and think about what you've done." She looked to the village leader - leader, or lawkeeper, she couldn't be sure - and saw he still gawked. "Are you alright, lad?"

"Y-yes, Lady Emissary!"

Her lip twitched indiscernibly, and she caught sight of the four-pointed star on his chest as his hand fell away from it. More people peered from now-open windows and doors in the distance, and many crept from their homes; toddlers grasped larger hands or sat on adults' shoulders. She sighed, and spoke to the young man again as people with stretchers made toward the wounded. "Detain the bandits. Can your prison accommodate them?"

"Yes, ma'am."

He waved his fellows to action. When the bandit gang was gathered, and being led off, many of the villagers framed the path as the woman trailed behind; their congregation in turn followed her as she walked. Whispers and half-hidden gasps of 'the Magnificent Lady Emissary' and 'Radiant Emissary' reached her ears as the leader and some others, between offering bouts of thanks, asked if she required food or lodging; asked how she had pulled off the jump from the copter; asked if she'd like a massage, or a bath, or needed to stock up on supplies; asked her if she would visit their shrine; assured her the field they'd seen the chopper land in was barren space, and it was fine; asked if it was true that she carried a mediocre katana because a fine one was needlessly dangerous in her hands.

"Not 'dangerous' so much as excessive," she got in, brow rising at the girl who'd asked it.

"Amazing… !"

"The year-end feast will still happen, thanks to you! Lady Emissary, we would be honored if you joined us!"

The woman paused, thoughtful. They followed the new calendar, then. And if the four-pointed stars most of them wore - whether in silver, clay, or tattoos - were any indication, the early-March new year was the most sacred day of this community's faith.

But she gave an apologetic look. "I have prior engagements to keep, I'm afraid. Though it was fortunate that we caught your distress signal en route of our return to the Toukyou Province…"

"Oh - of course. You must have official business to attend to, on such an important day…" It was said not with bitterness, but understanding. While the followers of the faith could discomfort her, she appreciated their respect. Among even those who thankfully refrained from meeting her with outright veneration, few if any ever treated her with anything short of sincerity and deference.

Settlements like these were precious sources of trade and agricultural products for the region; the thought that, if she requested it, they would probably hand over as much to her willingly as the bandits had sought to rob them for was a disquieting one. But she knew they would be disappointed if she declined their hospitality altogether.

"If you would be so kind as to have us for the evening, a simple meal for my helicopter pilot and I would be appreciated."

"Yes, at once!" As a man instructed a few of the villagers, another young woman who had hesitated at the warrior-emissary's side finally reached out. She was in her thirties, younger than the Radiant One, and held an infant in her arm.

"Lady Emissary," she said, bowing her head as her fingers brushed reverentially across a right sleeve. Her nervousness showed, but she was determined to ask. "Could you… tell us stories of the Goddess? If we could hear of her from your lips…"

Again with this. Many of the stories were less than glorious, but nonetheless they had taken root, transfixed, and inspired when first she had shared them. By now, at least, she was growing more accustomed to such a request.

"I certainly can - on the condition that you cease this 'Emissary' business. I am no divine messenger. My name is Satsuki; use it, if

you please."

"I-if that's your wish, Lady Satsuki!"

She nodded. "As you're aware, I knew your goddess in life, when she was a human. The first thing you ought to know about her is that she would be appalled to find you wasting time worshiping her."

Several listeners blanched. "O-oh…"

"Truly?"

"Yes. If you desire so strongly to profess your faith, do good in the world around you. Cherish your life and individuality; practice humility and mercy. And never allow your faith in humanity to fail you. Let the way you live, the path you walk, be your service to her…"

Satsuki spoke with them over soup and ultimately well into the night. She told the far-off story of a child, tasked with a mission, who had built an army; and of the vagrant girl with the scissor blade who had stormed into her academy one day. She told of opposition and reconciliation; of paths fraught with turmoil, rage, and mistakes, but somehow intertwined.

'Prior engagements to keep' - that *was* one way of putting it.

Satsuki knew that many would by then have flocked, from even well beyond the civilization of the roughly-defined Toukyou Province's lands, to visit the great temple in the city for the New Year's holy day. The goddess's birthday, as they called it. Not the original woman's birthday, but the Day of Apotheosis coinciding with the anniversary of the world's salvation.

But the place Satsuki had come to was quiet; she knelt alone on the verdurous hill, head down, the light scent of burning incense like sweet spice to her nostrils. Including Satsuki herself, few knew of this place, and she intended to see it remain as such. No matter how

often she'd shared the tale, she doubted many, if any, could truly grasp the significance of what this time was to her. She could still barely describe it herself.

Not the pain she'd felt, eyes pensive and hollowly fierce set with bleak vigilance on a pyre's flames. Not the knot in her throat, steady as the weight of the urn in her hands as she'd departed from Honnouji, wounded and battered, and wandered the remains of the Toukyou area to find a suitable location. Not the dull, quiet anger that simmered at the corners of her eyes as she scavenged for what she needed, forgot to feed herself, and engraved the name so painstakingly into a flat face of the block of stone. Not the impetuous way, through a blur of tears and damnation of propriety, she'd carved her own name beside it, and dyed it red, a promise to join the deceased when the time arrived. Not the crash of cold reality she'd felt as she finally piled the loose soil she'd shoveled out over the urn again.

These things, with regards to their 'goddess,' were Satsuki's alone.

Her eyelids twitched and rose eventually. She reached into a pocket in her robe.

"By the new calendar, tomorrow… is the start of the twentieth year already, huh…"

Her left hand deposited a lemon before the stone memorial, by a bundle of limp wildflowers that already rested there. She then sat back, and her right hand brought another bright yellow fruit to her lips. She bit through the peel and directly into sour flesh, barely cringing as she ate it in such a barbaric fashion.

Where had the years gone? A few wading through the chaos, trepidation, and confusion of survivors of a fragmented world, as rebuilding sought out places to begin; watching the old world be salvaged in bits and pieces, spreading communication technology, and working with farmers, medics, builders, electricians, craftsmen, anyone she could help. The Toukyou Province had risen as one of

few centers of concentrated technological and cultural reclamation, and the largest she'd seen in all her travels.

She'd accrued years of wandering, and written prolifically of problems encountered and solved in budding settlements, of useful findings and contemplations. In the years 9 to 14, she'd struck out on a journey to the Asian mainland - and continued on to Europe, to Africa, and back again. And she'd found, just as she could now solve effectively any straightforward problem by focusing on it, she could identify - and promptly understand and speak - any human language or dialect she was faced with.

"You left me a soul that had been touched by the lost billions, and then assured me that I was free to live whatever life I pleased. The fucking nerve of you," she spat, slipping briefly, accidentally, into a delinquent's gruff tone. If she didn't watch herself, *that* rolled out almost a bit too naturally; if only she had any use of it. Her look was wry. "It's a mess, is what it is. A world in shambles. What else could I do, with such a gift?"

She was not deeply resentful. From a utilitarian standpoint, she couldn't deny that having it was preferable to having let it be lost; this knowledge had come from humans, and should be returned to them, to the extent that was possible. She couldn't quite peruse the wealth of it freely, or even hold awareness of any significant fraction of it at a given moment, for how expansive it was; to comprehend such would put an impossible strain on any one human brain.

But she walked through the world with an almost unbearable sagacity and clarity of mind; if she actively sought situations that demanded insight, relevant points would sift reliably together like wisps of a forgotten past, surfacing from afar. A web of theory and parallels took form from countless minds, and pressed itself into a puzzle, neatly solved, before being discarded again. She could dabble in any field at an expert level. It wasn't bewildering that the faithful saw in her some mythical being, warrior, healer, and sage - the Virtuous Emissary, blessed by the Goddess to walk the earth as

a harbinger of good fortune. The reality was simply that quasi-enlightenment made her an excellent problem-solver.

The moment she discovered it, in shambling through the grim tasks that led to interring her younger sister's ashes here, a spark of urgency had begun to nip sharply at her heels. It had almost cheated her grief from her, and that wasn't fair. But she had soon grown distractingly conscious of the sense that each day of idle grieving was a day that could be spent aiding other survivors and reclaiming lost knowledge. The gift lent her a disproportionate capacity to do good in the world.

It had picked up a woman in desperate need of purpose, and driven her on. It might have been Ryuuko's final way of saving her life.

So she documented extensively as she used it, and gave the knowledge of pre-collapse civilization for distribution - typing to the bare-bones internet for the provinces that had it, for translators and printers and circulation. From roughlands settlement-starters to province-based innovators, it was free for whoever could benefit from it. She had rapidly begun to see the effects of her endeavor, and even better, others building further upon it of their own accord. The world was healing every day, and that healing progressed more and more naturally as the years went on.

The challenges Satsuki tackled grew more sophisticated as, in large, specialized Provinces especially, human cooperation and practical innovation began to accelerate past even the tremendous gift at her disposal, as a single woman able to solve *any* problem still could not within a lifetime think about *all* problems.

Just as well, she had realized. The world had already planted stable enough footholds that humans would finish standing up again on their own, whether her humanitarian project hastened them or not. And the sooner the Kiryuuin name could fade into obscurity, the better.

Infrastructure, technology, and science weren't the only things that reemerged, of course. She frowned at the thought of the bandit gang. At the close of what many called the Dark Years, human life had held a sort of newly miraculous, precious status, as survivors overwhelmingly respected the gravity of their scarcity, and the four years of terror they'd all struggled through. Already, in two decades, that reverence for life waned precariously in some. People strove to be connected now, and resources would remain plentiful for time to come. But she wondered how many generations would flourish before people gave over to openly warring amongst themselves again.

"The nightmare is over; the worst, at our backs. Yet no matter what we endure together, conflict between humans will never truly cease. You accepted this, and *they* accepted this - that we're capable of things both horrific and great - and decided humankind was worth saving. So I will continue to do what I can."

She managed a smile, looking to the sky. "Everywhere I go, people want to hear the story - to know just how the world was saved. For kilometers around, those who glimpsed it firsthand - saw our light, they say, like a star in the sky - were filled with the sense that someone strong is fighting for them. And it inspired them to fight for themselves." She lowered her head, watching the incense burn.

That's what a god does, then…

Her lip trembled as her eyes traveled over the two great scissor blades wedged into the earth behind the grave, and the name etched into the stone.

"It still hurts, to see them… It's strange, you know? They never even knew you, but they say they love you. And here I am, preaching your word when they look to me for guidance. It's so strange… but if they're to speak of you, I want them to know the truth. If they'll think of you, they need to know and forgive the person you were, not the goddess you became. That's what I believe…"

Standing, she looked out at the sunset; light glinted on the scissor blades as a cool zephyr sent waves of lively green undulating across the hill.

As long as the world has need of this soul, I'll keep fighting.

She was emerging at the head of the forested trail, looking to the lights of the Toukyou Province's main settlement in the distance, when she detected something approaching from behind, at an alarming speed.

"*KIRYUUIN SATSUKIIII!!* "

She had ducked; something was whistling over her head beneath the cry of challenge. The wooden sword swept around, but as it drew back for an overhead swing Satsuki rounded on the attacker, her own katana sliding partly from its sheath. Hilt met hilt, and the sturdy *bokken* popped cleanly from the ambusher's hands, sailing off behind her as two deep cobalt eyes widened in shock.

"Kiryuuin Atsuko," Satsuki said in greeting as the girl hopped back with a scowl, and with firm, dark eyebrows drawn inward as her face flushed red across the cheeks. Shoulder-length hair, messy bangs. Though she crouched in her stance, fists up, if she'd stood straight she might have come all the way up to Satsuki's shoulders, now.

[KIRYUUIN ATSUKO]

"What are you doing outside the settlement this late?"

"This Province is the safest in the world. You're off in the roughlands for months and you wanna' act all motherly now?"

"You're thirteen, Atsuko. It's dark out."

"*Fourteen* now." She scowled. "When you were fourteen, you were starting national conquests or something, right?"

Satsuki's eyes darkened. "What has Uncle Houka been telling you?"

"L-leave Uncle Houka out of this! Anyway, you know I'm strong for my age! Would it kill ya' to *shout* my name in return?"

"If it would, it strikes me as a poor way to claim a victory," Satsuki deadpanned.

"Okaa-san!" the teen whined.

"What are you doing out here?"

"Uncle said you were coming back today, and you'd definitely stop here," she said, not elaborating further.

This girl hung around here all day? She must have missed the festival in town… Satsuki bit her lip. "The flowers on the grave…?"

"W-well - since I was in the area, and *you* were takin' forever, I thought - y'know, Auntie might like them…" Her eyes grew. "They're not what gave me away, are they?"

"No," Satsuki said honestly. "I would have heard your approach regardless."

"*Ch*…" A frustrated sound. She looked down, and went to retrieve her bokken.

Satsuki's hand snapped to her own sword again as a sharp pop caught her ears.

But there were no bullets speeding toward them. The clear night sky behind her, over Toukyou Bay, was suddenly painted with flowers of scattering light. She exhaled, but she knew Atsuko had seen her

tense. She smiled for the girl's saddened look, ferocity leaving her eyes as quickly as it had appeared. "Now it makes sense… Did you want to watch the New Year's fireworks together?"

A quick nod.

They climbed to a good tree branch; Satsuki offered the girl a hand, and it was taken with only a halfhearted attempt at a stubborn face.

Your niece takes after you, Satsuki thought absentmindedly, once they'd settled. *Without ever having met you. Certainly, she's me around the eyebrows. But on the inside, she's every bit the child…*

Her daughter was independent and strong-willed, but Satsuki didn't know how to deal with her. She'd named her with characters spelling 'precious child,' ensuring there was no ambiguity to be had with its meaning. Aside from that, Satsuki had no idea where to go.

"Okaa-san always looks so sad."

She turned her head at the mutter, watching the lights glint from the girl's eyes as she swung her feet idly forward and back. "Even though you're a hero. It's like you're always hurting somewhere. And it's always the worst today. You really miss Aunt Ryuuko, don't you?"

Satsuki nodded gravely, gaze drifting up to the fireworks again.

"I know more about the 'Emissary' and the 'Goddess' from the stories than I know from *you*, Mom."

"I'm… sorry." It would have been easier if Atsuko had been cross or hated her, she realized. But she understood Satsuki's duty, and worried for her instead.

Maybe Satsuki had avoided this because it *wouldn't* be easy to deal with. It wasn't a problem easily solved. It wouldn't be easy, or comfortable, for her to bring up a young girl. But she'd made a

decision fourteen years ago, and she was well past due to commit to it.

The girl glanced at her. "When do you leave again?"

"Soon."

"I wanna' go with you."

"You know the roughlands can be perilous. Law is an insubstantial thing, out there."

"I know. And I know you hafta' go because there's so much to do. But you don't have to go alone. Maybe, with some help, it'll be easier on you, or…" Her face became firm. "I'm strong, Okaa-san. But there's only so much I can learn from Uncle and the Province guards, when I've already surpassed them."

"You've been thinking about this."

"Mm." A shrug.

The fizzle and pop of the fireworks was all they heard for a few minutes. Satsuki straightened her back with a sigh.

"… I'll spar with you in the morning. You can show me how much you've improved."

The girl brightened. "Th-then…?"

She saw one of her mother's rare, true smiles in profile, and an even rarer spark in her eye. Kiryuuin Satsuki, the saint, the living legend. Human, after all.

"When the day comes that I can cross practice blades seriously with you… Then, I might just find it in me to shout your name in answer."

The girl threw her arms around her, hiding her face in her chest. But Satsuki felt her shoulders give a telltale shake.

All the knowledge in the world can't help me here. I don't know what I'm doing.

The woman lifted her hand, hesitated, and awkwardly patted her on the head.

I guess… I'm well past due to start figuring out.

The world's second-most-powerful human was a fourteen-year-old girl, and was crying in her arms. She'd need to be prepared for whatever future lay before her.

Satsuki's permanent residence was unimpressive, her room sparsely adorned with necessities and lightly used. She sat at a computer desk, lenses glinting in a pair of glasses perched over her nose, fingers a precise blur upon the keyboard. She paused at a polite knock to the frame of her open door; pushing her glasses up, she offered her old friend a smile, and nodded for him to enter.

"Pardon the intrusion, Virtuous Emissary," Houka said with stiff, exaggerated formality, maneuvering a tea tray into a patch of available space on her desk.

"Oh, quit," she chided good-naturedly, stretching back in her chair as he took her empty cup, leaving a steaming new one in its place.

"I thought you could use a refill." He nodded to her screen. "More for the Database?"

"I was able to tap into quite a bit of it, this time." She yawned. "I kept up with most of it as I traveled, but some stacked up. More documents up, now. Some diagrams, as well. If you and your assistants could look through them when you have a chance…"

"Of course. Thank you, as always. The translators should be able to prioritize it in the coming days as well." He blew on his own cup of tea, and drew in a sip.

The Reclamation Database was no attempt to compile an outright encyclopedia of as much of the knowledge as possible; such an archive would take countless lifetimes to complete. Rather, it was a labor of practicality, a database built around a hierarchy of necessity and emphasizing what would be of use to a rebuilding world.

By the traffic statistics Houka collected, the Database was well-used. And the people able to access it readily printed and disseminated new documents to those who could not, as Satsuki encouraged on each new entry.

Satsuki smiled gratefully. "I'm glad a Provincial Lord still has time to lend a hand in these things, and to enjoy tea with an old friend." She watched light play on the liquid's surface, as steam curled away from its rim. "If only more of us could have made it this far…"

Inumuta's mien was solemn. The man was somewhat lanky, and always clean-shaven; neat, square eyeglasses were tinted slightly to help with computer screens as well as the sun. Light blue hair had been allowed to grow long enough to draw into a short, loose tail in the back, and sported a few strands of gray, as Satsuki's began to. His jaw was just a bit squarer than it had been in youth, and faint wrinkles added texture about his eyes and brow. "Any leader would welcome and greet you in their settlement, Satsuki, whether as a messiah or a bringer of good fortune." His eye twinkled. "It provides a fine excuse for me to check on you."

"I'll still never be able to thank you enough for looking after Atsuko for me."

"She's a good kid - barely sits still, but she stays out of trouble." He chuckled. "She was grinning ear to ear, earlier. She ran right over to tell me the news. You're going to start training her in her powers, then?"

"I promised her no such thing… but, yes. That is also important to pass on. I've put it off too long as is…"

He nodded, thoughtful. "Satsuki… have you ever considered settling down?"

"What's this, now?"

"You're forty-two years old, Satsuki. And in twenty years… no. To my understanding, in thirty-seven of them, you've barely let yourself rest. But you're hailed as a saint. You've already done so much for this world. Your contributions have nurtured the Toukyou Province into the most prosperous, safe, and technologically robust on record. If you were to lead people again, and make your own settlement, it would be a haven."

"Of that, I'm not so confident." She gave a contemplative glance. "The reason I hesitated to train Atsuko - I'm sure you've discerned it. She worries she's a disappointment to me, but she holds too *much* potential. As she is now, aside from me, she could best any individual human in combat; if she develops her ki, free of constraint, she will become another anomaly of my caliber. And what use should a free human society have for individuals with the strength of armies? We are wildly out of balance…"

"There could be no better hands to wield such power. You'll use it for what's right - you both would."

"The power, I will trust her with. I'll train her in it; I'll also teach her to refrain from intervening in world affairs. It will be best… if humans ultimately forget the name *Kiryuuin*, and shape their world without us."

"Humans…" His brow furrowed. Then understanding widened his eyes to the slightest degree. "So you'll refrain from shaping the world, and leave behind hidden protectors - guardians, in the event that Life Fibers someday find their way here again."

Satsuki did not correct him; nor did she meet his eyes, just now. "I love her - I don't know how to show it, but I can assure you of that. And her father was a fine individual; what happened to him years

ago was terrible. But you already know that the girl was the product of neither impulse nor passion; I explained as much when I asked you before I asked him. Knowing this, is it so horrid to admit that I reproduced in order to preserve the 'glitch' that's already saved this planet once before?" She brought her cup to her lips.

Logically, there *was* a limit of efficiency in the Life Fibers' design. Even they must have realized they could fail, if extraordinarily rarely; balancing efficiency against the risk, they would have to let host species evolve, for instance, to points at which statistically one in a thousand planets might in natural variation yield an 'error,' spawning an entity capable of overthrowing them. The capacity, the right combination of conditions. Satsuki and Ryuuko had ultimately been a miracle of probability, nothing more, even if their determination, their free will, had dealt the blow.

Houka frowned. "But what does that have to do with your aversion to settling down? You still intend to travel and bolster growth in the roughlands; you're currently playing a far more active role in the world, aren't you?"

"Not quite." She smirked at her old friend, apologetic. The gift flickered smartly in her eyes, rebuilding in one moment a calculation she'd already pondered too many times. The probable outcome never swayed.

"If I led my own settlement, it would not become a haven. It would become an *empire* ."

Kiryuuin Satsuki and Atsuko set out soon after, to travel the world and help as many people as they could.

MANY YEARS LATER

"… and in the end, my sister erased herself with her former enemy, body and soul, to save this world. That's the story I told, so, so long ago…"

The softly grizzled voice paused on a brief sigh, as she tucked a strand of pale hair back behind her ear.

"I've passed so much on to the world. Down the line, there was even more and more room to dwell on history, philosophy, culture. The world has changed, hasn't it? I restored as much as I could… but it's grown out of needing to stand on the old era any longer. It's living, blooming in its own shape…

"And all this time, would you believe what they held onto, tighter than anything? With the story of your sacrifice… a new 'god' was born. And while I've seen the faith take form across the world, and heard her praised in many tongues, here in our homeland, the followers call her *Matoiryuukonokami* ."

Still-sharp blue eyes crinkled at the corners with pride, and she had to chuckle at the irony. Somewhere along the line - maybe fifty years ago, maybe twenty - her smile had begun to come easily to her.

"The Child Who Binds Up the Flow of worlds, their energy, their fate… became the Goddess Who Gathered the Lost Children, freed the ones stolen and enslaved by the Creator, and gave the abandoned, despairing humans left on this world a new future. A future we pried open, with our own hands… A path she thrust herself down, and cleared for us, as a spear plunged into the chains of fate…"

She trailed off, shivering at a chill breeze; this March had held a lingering bite, and light snowfall had even dusted the Toukyou Province earlier that day. She withdrew a kerchief from her coat; she was dabbing neatly at her nose as she heard someone approach.

"Grandmother," a man's voice said, as a hand met her shoulder.

"Ah - Naoki," she said, facing a tan face with short, dark hair, a sharp chin, and strikingly blue eyes. Whatever things varied over the generations, she was beginning to doubt the eyebrows would ever change, in those with so much as a drop of their blood. The thirty-something-old was a great-grandson, but all of them after Atsuko had taken to calling her 'Grandmother.' Presently, the lad looked apologetic for his intrusion.

"The fireworks will start, soon."

She looked out at the fading twilight. "Yes, I suppose they will…"

He helped her to her feet. As they neared the trail back through the trees, a toddler who'd hung back with more of the family scampered up with a squeal, chubby fingers clasping around one lean one as she walked patiently at Granny's side, and shared a smile with the elder. In less than a year now, this one would begin basic martial arts instruction, and then learn to handle a practice sword. As had all her predecessors on the Kiryuuin side, she would learn to shape and use her ki, as she was instructed in the teachings Grandmother had lain down. She would also learn someday of the history of her progenitors before Grandmother, and the old-era horrors the new Kiryuuin left at their backs. When she came of age, she might travel the world, and would live the life she chose, while blending in to the rest of society.

The Kiryuuin bloodline was scattered about the world in its budding numbers, and as per their code, they would train in secret, avoid conflict, and live as humans. The ones who'd made it home for the New Year's festival were only a handful…

"Grandmother, are you alright?" a young woman asked.

"Daydreaming. I must be sleepy…" She wore a kindly face as a brother and sister ran through the trees, laughter in the air as their

practice blades clashed with a level of sureness rather uncommon for children of six years and eight.

They watched the fireworks from a familiar spot, spreading a blanket to sit. Many of the opening volley popped to spread in the shape of four-pointed stars, the symbol of the Goddess and her ascension. The elder mused that she hadn't even beheld such a shape, from in the sky with her sister that day. It had simply been bright, all around them…

"Grandmother?"

She straightened with a start, as she'd begun to lean. She clutched the woolen wrap someone had draped across her shoulders, while a tot on her lap looked curiously up at her. "Don't mind me. I was starting to nod off…"

"If you're tired, you should rest," Naoki urged gently. "Come, let's get you back home…"

That night, in her room in the family estate on *Honnou-jima*, she sat at her desk, poring briefly over the last philosophical ramblings she'd put to form a few days prior. She turned to a fresh page. She considered a moment, but ultimately pulled her heavy glasses away, and sat back to relax. She had never written the story for the Faith, but the people wrote it out, preserved it without her trying. Just as well. Perhaps it was time to rest…

She lilted into a nostalgic musing as she settled for bed. One wall was decorated with certificates and medals, marks of the honors and accolades of various nations and organizations to recognize her. She'd known and worked with so many good people, seen so many go. But her gaze lingered elsewhere, on a precious, old photograph in a frame.

The losses were great, and the road fraught with mistakes. But by and large, those who remain say that this world was salvaged, and

shall forevermore be protected, by a being known as The Apocalypse Breaker.

Matoi Ryuuko…

The god of those who've lost their way… and the god of those who find it.

She held her blankets snugly around her, nestling her head against a pillow.

This is the soul that's a part of me… Before exhausting mine, you gave me your own, so that I could live this long. It's sustained me, while leaving my brain and mind, my 'self' intact. But I've never forgotten this soul was yours, every bit as much as this right arm…

So has mine all been borrowed time? Or have I been talking to shadows, all these years? I've wondered what happens, in the end…

The thought used to trouble me… but it's fine now, whatever the case.

Her hand clasped over her heart. Her smile was peaceful, as she surrendered to oncoming slumber.

We've done so much… You did well, you child.

And as long as Kiryuuin breathe, this world you disappeared for will never again be threatened by Life Fibers.

We'll ensure it… with our own hands, this time.

Human force of will is not something to be trifled with.

When she woke, it was warm and bright, like the day.

That was the sense she got, of the arm folded around her, and the form against hers. Warm, serene, and so perfectly safe. The

embrace was familiar; she returned it naturally, even as confusion stirred mildly within her. Soft grass cradled them, while leaves wafted lazily overhead.

"What…?" She looked up at a soothing, just slightly lopsided smile. A pleasant breeze made across her senses, a sympathetic caress.

"You didn't wake up, sis. Your heart quit."

"Oh…"

"How do you feel? You seemed so cold…"

"It's not cold anymore…" She clutched the young woman's arm, feeling her against her and basking in the sensation of her. She felt light.

This was it, then. They were intertwined, truly and deeply; if this was another aspect of their peculiar fate, it was one she welcomed.

"I don't think I'll feel cold ever again."

Her companion snickered. "You got so old. Hardly anyone gets to be that old."

"I'm sorry… I made you wait for so long, didn't I?"

"Don't apologize for that. You're here now, ain't you?" The younger one pressed her lips gratefully to her forehead. Her heart was awash with joy, with solace, with warmth akin to the tender glow suffusing the meadow around them. "Thank you… for letting me see so much. I saw everything, from here; I saw the new world, and it's beautiful. You did great."

"I did what anyone would have."

"You did what only you could."

This elicited a soft laugh. Fingers intertwined as two sets of blue eyes drank each other in, cherishing. It was time to rest. There was a lifetime to talk about, an eternity to enjoy.

"Thank you…" Moistening eyes shut. She hadn't realized how afraid she'd been that she would be different - that the goddess, if she existed somewhere, would no longer be the person she remembered. But she was here, and her younger sister remembered her. She was still hers.

They had found their way home to each other's arms. For now, at the end of the longest of roads, they were content with the briefest of words.

"I'm home… Ryuuko."

"Welcome home, sis."

[img: http://orig10.deviantart.net/dee9/f/2016/194/e/b/embracefinaldark_by_hinata0321-da9tesl.png]

I'll stay here with you, always.

-At the End of Days-

[END]